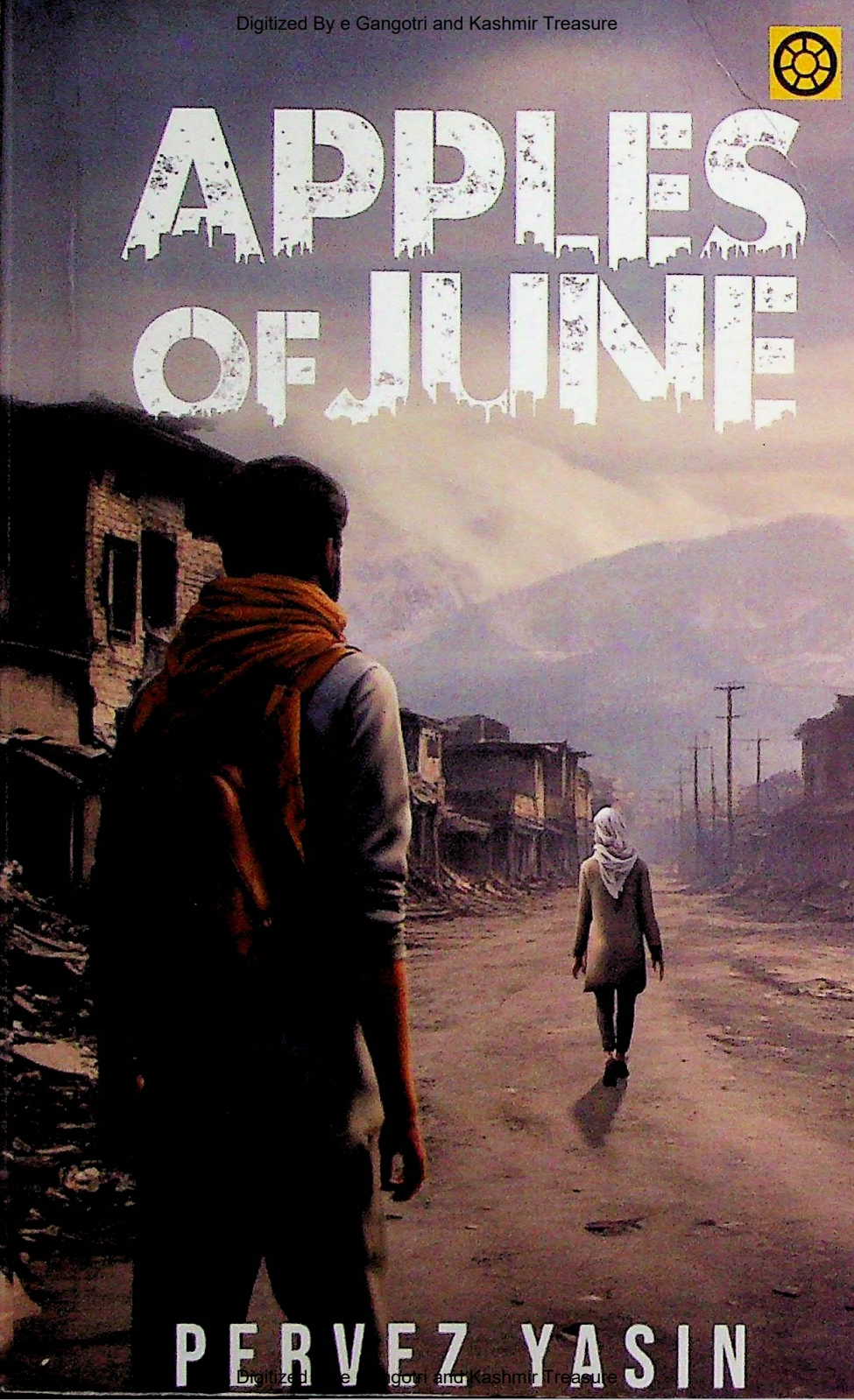
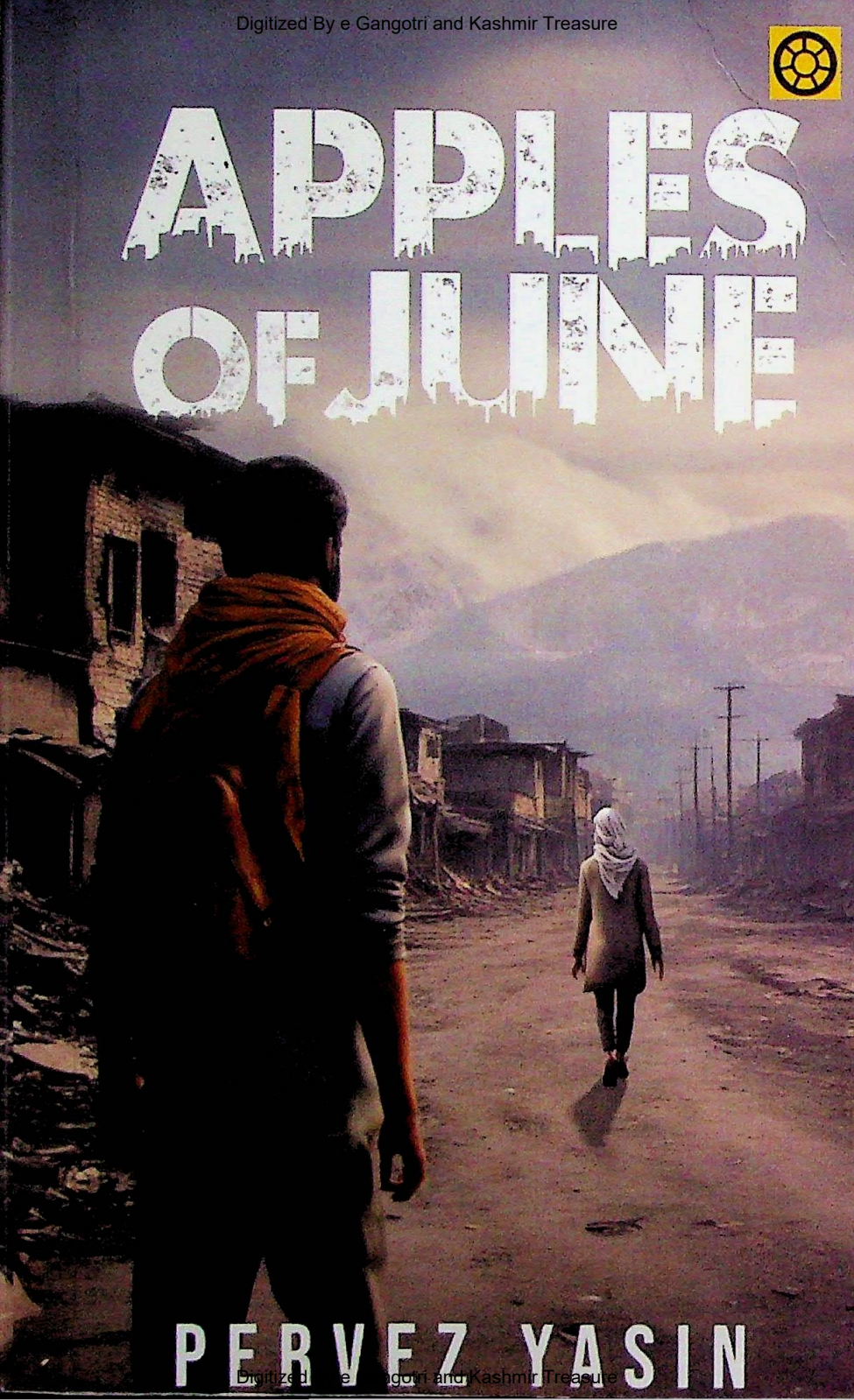
Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure



Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure



Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Apples of June

Pervez Yasin

Book Street Publications

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

BOOK STREET PUBLICATIONS

Apples of June

Pervez Yasin

Published by:

JAI3E Studio Private Limited

(Erstwhile Jitendra Anand Infratech Private Limited)
2203, Express Trade Towers – 2,
Sector – 132, Noida – 201304.

e-mail: jaipl3e@gmail.com
web: jai3e.wordpress.com

First Edition: October, 2024

ISBN Number: 978-81-19264-38-4

Copyright © Pervez Yasin

All rights reserved by international and pan Indian copyright conventions. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of the writer and publisher.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

For

Abba & Amma

...for

Sabia

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Highly thankful to:

Jahangir Raina for reading and evaluating my initial draft. His insightful feedback was instrumental in inspiring me to continue writing this story.

Dr Huzaifa Pandit for helping me shape this narrative.

Suhail Zam Zam and Ashraf Lone for their support and guidance.

Suhail Mathur, my wise and exceptionally knowledgeable literary agent, and his energetic team at 'The Book Bakers Literary Agency', for guiding me and leading me toward publishing my story.

Younis Anjum for his invaluable assistance in fine-tuning the final shape of this book, and preparing it for print.

Jitendra Anand for his patience in ensuring a seamless publication of this book.

To all my wonderful friends and dear ones, thank you for making this story possible!

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Chapter One

A green hand grenade exploded just outside the earth-bag bunker. The bunker, raised to chest height around the base of a four-sided clock tower, was engulfed by a sudden storm of dust. Splinters of the grenade also chipped off the scarred limestone plaster from the four concrete columns on which the clock rested. On the slanting roof of the tower, rock pigeons courting leisurely flew in terror. The rapid flapping of their wings echoed in the pall of silence that followed the explosion. Although the blast did not kill anyone, the deafening bang that shook the busy commercial hub and shattered the glass fronts of the nearby shops was followed by the sharp noise of gunshots. The panic sent the three o'clock crowd at Lal Chowk into a frenzy.

The clock of the clock tower - named Ghanta Ghar - read seven-thirty, as always. To the east of this misleading clock tower was Residency Road, flanked by ivy-choked Tyndale Biscoe School, which hid from sight the Mallinson Girls' School in the chivalrous style it was famed for, and the bomb-shattered Insurance Building on the left. Adjacent to this abandoned building, the fenced Pratap Park, overran by weeds and bred on years of neglect, faced the ruins of the Government Information Building across the road. A towering wall of Russian poplars stood parallel to the road at the edge of the park.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Ahead, near the junction, where the road branched left to meet Maulana Azad (M.A.) Road, an old Chinar tree that resembled a giant upside-down octopus sleeping on its head, hosted a small group of disenchanted *Charsis* in its shade. On the other side of the road, its branches hung over the discoloured gate of Regal Cinema.

At the time of the explosion, a wave of human current made an involuntary U-turn just in front of Tyndale Biscoe School. It carried within it puzzled cows, handcarts spilling the articles meant for *Eid* sale, ragged beggars, school children struggling with their heavy satchels, giggling girl students and the boys who pursued them. The panicked wave skipped over the potholes and slipped over the wares left unattended on the footpaths by vendors. Those who saw the wave coming also turned around, adding to the confusion near the Government Information Building.

A group of college girls clad in grey-and-white uniforms, walking over the footpath along the Pratap Park, was also alarmed. They turned back with the current and got lost in the melee.

For Rizwan Malik, tranquil and unfazed amidst the chaos of the stampede, it was just another facet of worldly life - a fleeting little ripple amid a greater sea of transience. But his transient outlook was stunned because, in the rapidly dispersing crowd, he saw an ethereal vision. At the moment the little green bomb exploded, he found himself looking into a pair of bright -grey eyes. Despite the ringing in his ears, he stood

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

transfixed and spellbound. The sight of those bewitching eyes stirred in him so deep a surprise that he unwittingly let go of the arm of the blind man he was helping cross the road. He had not seen the girl, though. He could not recollect who she was or what she looked like, but he was overwhelmed by a sudden, crushing urge to possess those bright-grey eyes.

And then, as suddenly as he had found her, he lost her in the tumult. He was overpowered by an intense feeling of a free fall, as if he was going downhill in a fast-moving vehicle, and his guts were betraying him. Saddened, he looked around but everything seemed inferior to the sight of those eyes that hovered around him. He found himself floating in a bubble that the bright-grey eyes had conjured - the world felt unreal - as if in a dying dream. Dregs of his broken dreams, which were but a few, also floated before his eyes. A profound desolation took root in his heart. He started running to escape this suffocating despair.

Ever since his dream of becoming the State Badminton Champion was shattered, he had found solace in self-inquiry. 'From unreal to real,' Samir Pandita - blond, tall with brown eyes, champion basketballer, mentor and friend - had told him on their first meeting. Emphasising the dawdling nature of self, he warned him to guard his life and use his time judiciously, for only the living could be liberated. Although they had seen each other often in the bicycle parking lot outside the Kashmir Indoor Stadium, they only met when the soldiers occupied the stadium.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

As Rizwan tried to move along with the crowd that exhaled a breath of smouldering cinder, unseen forces held him back; everyone running was fighting his forward movement; ghost-walls rose in his path, and his legs got entangled in other people's limbs. There were knees to be negotiated, shoulders to be wrestled, faces to be avoided and above all, the inertia of his own movement to be managed. He struggled, flayed, pushed and pulled until he got himself disentangled from the Insurance Building side crowd. With clumsy strides, he ran across the road toward the less crowded footpath along the ruins of the Government Information Building.

He ran over the scattered shopware and was soon past the discoloured gate of Regal Cinema, which housed the soldiers' camp. And though nearly hopeless by that moment, he managed to catch a glimpse of the bright-grey eyes once more. She was a tall girl in a grey -and-white uniform. Immensely relieved, he stood in his place to have a good look at her and realised that he wanted to keep looking at her. Although he had not known her before, she appeared familiar. Her pale pink lips, smooth chin, balanced nose and fair complexion marked by the undulation of rust-coloured pimples reassured him that he was not out of place. He only wondered why he had not met her before.

Walking briskly with an aura of rebellion towards M.A. Road, she moved with her tall stature, head jutted forward, giving her a hawk-like, predatory air. Rizwan saw that she held the dupatta in place with the help of

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

her left hand, perhaps to conceal the profile of her bosom.

Her intensely black hair, which was not parted in the middle, did not stir much while she moved away from the post-blast scene. Tiny, tender tempests formed in Rizwan's heart. He realised that her presence was capable of erasing the world around him because she incited in him feelings of pleasant but instantaneous devastation. Later, Rizwan recollected that a plump blonde girl with a boy's haircut, donning the same grey -and-white uniform, was walking elegantly alongside her without any apparent haste.

It had become common practice for militants to throw grenades at this hour of the day and even more so during the month of *Ramazan*. Boys took this opportunity to impress the girls they pursued. Despite cold and fasting, they would wait outside the stonewalled compound of Girls College from early noon. When the metallic gate opened inwards, precisely at three o'clock, a tide of boisterous girl students - donning grey frocks and snow-white shalwars - gushed out and spread in different directions. Boys would then separate and trail their choices, daring social ridicule, God's wrath, and death. When the first girl appeared near Ghanta Ghar, a grenade was thrown at the earth-bag bunker raised around it. Without fail, it exploded on the road.

Although militants were not clear about the purpose of disturbing the delicate peace at this hour of the day, courting on roads was considered immoral -

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

more so during the month of *Ramazan*. The armed uprising against Indian rule in Kashmir had intensified. The importance of moral code, communicated through newspapers and paper posters, became increasingly stringent, especially in public.

But these things did not come to Rizwan's mind while he was running or when he stopped to watch the bright-grey-eyed girl. He was absolutely taken in by the indecipherable appeal of her eyes. He did not know what he was going to do or what he would tell her, but he wanted her nonetheless.

The Rizwan who started off running with an impulse was not the same whom the soldiers stopped near the Regal Cinema. He was a changed man. In his attempt to find the girl, he had overrun himself. He had, in the brief moment of his transformation, momentarily come back to his worldly life. Colour had returned to the air, and reality had once more overtaken him.

The area was cordoned off in a jiffy. Soldiers in fatigues - pouring out from the Regal Cinema, the adjoining Pamposh Hotel and large, idling trucks - started herding the people in. There were occasional shouts while the noisy crowd broke into clearly distinguishable queues. Then, there was order and blank silence. Gunshots stopped. Occasional cries of the boys beaten by the soldiers raised the level of fear. Frisking and questioning began.

Rizwan, along with the long queue he found himself in, was made to turn around and he came face to face with the shadowy ghost of Regal Cinema.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Memories of his younger days fought his conscious efforts to conjure up the reason for his presence in Lal Chowk. Instinctively, he kept his I-card ready in his right hand.

'Who are you?' A tall soldier asked in Hindi.

Rizwan sensed the smell of a fresh shave. 'Rizwan.'

'What are you doing here?'

Rizwan could see the tall girl in his mind's eye crossing the M.A. Road with long, open strides - heading, perhaps, to the interior city. He thrust out his I -card.

The soldier, accepting the I-card, began comparing Rizwan with his photograph. 'What do you do?'

'Looking for employment. Completed my college.'

The soldier waited, looked at his tall, athletic physique and said scornfully, 'Why don't you join the Indian Army?'

Rizwan looked back into the soldier's eyes without any shred of doubt or fear. They exchanged a look of tacit but difficult understanding. The soldier, shaking his head slowly, once again examined Rizwan's looks before handing back the I-card to him.

By then, three green jeeps were parked neatly in army fashion in front of the Regal Cinema gate. A masked informer called '*Mukhbir*' sat on the front seat of each vehicle. One soldier stood in front of each vehicle, passing the boys from one vehicle to another to be scrutinised by all *Mukhbirs*. Then they were asked to sit farther, in another gathering.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Terrified, boys passed by the vehicles one by one. If any of the *Mukhbirs* pressed the horn, it meant indefinite imprisonment, disappearance or sometimes immediate death. Rizwan waited for his turn, thinking not about his precarious circumstances but the alluring, bright-grey-eyed girl.

*

Oblivious to the effect she had caused on Rizwan, the grey-eyed girl breathed a sigh of relief at having escaped the melee. She crossed M.A. Road and walked home at a brisk pace. Although she appeared overwhelmed by zest and lust for life, the broken mirror of her childhood memories always shone a light into the dark corners of her solitude. She always felt like walking in the labyrinthine corridors of Chinar Ghar while her feet moved over the cobbled courtyard of Mir Manzil. In the cacophony of traffic, she heard the shrill cries of childhood cicadas. She thought of the overhead grapevine as branches of apple trees. Now that she was tall, she could eat apples straight from the branches just like her three Mamoos. Mir Manzil had grapevines, ivy, and numerous other creepers and climbers but not a single tree.

Even the mud-wall that fenced the courtyard was swallowed by the unkempt jumble of Devil's ivy and Flame vine. The brick mansion at the centre of the yard was choked by the dusty and discoloured Morning-glory. Its windows were restrained by the dense overgrowth and the omnipresent fear of reptiles. The climbers were notorious for harbouring snakes that no

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

one had ever seen. But for her, even the sight of a mere earthworm was loathsome. She detested things that crept on the earth.

Her name was Shaheen - she belonged to the skies – even as she was not fond of her name for two reasons. First, it overshadowed the name she had chosen for herself as a child - Rani, the queen. Second, as Rukhsana, her elder sister, had pointed out that Shaheen was a male name, and a proper lady had an 'a' at the end of her name. So her name ought to have been 'Shaheena'.

In the sweltering summer of the year 1973, her father, Khwaja Iqbal Mir, son of the most renowned shawl merchant of Kashmir, the great Khwaja Samad Mir, on the advice of a *Peer* decided to name his second child (which he was assured would be a boy) after the inspirational bird, Shaheen-the-hawk, even before the child was born. Her mother, Dr Firdousa, wept tears of joy when the *Peer* showered blessings on her: *'Gobre' moji ro'b chui raezi...'* But disappointed at having fathered a second daughter, Iqbal lost interest not only in the name but also in the girl who was born.

The newborn was a cheerful, plump baby with devilish, bright-grey eyes. Conceived out of delusional hope of her parents and her paternal grandmother - Raja Begum - with a preconceived name and laden with undeserved burdens, she was left entirely to the care of her three maternal uncles whose names were so insignificant that everybody at Mir Manzil knew them only by their kinship to the cherished Rukhsana: Bada

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Mamoo, Manjla Mamoo and Chota Mamoo, in the descending order of their age.

A year after Shaheen was born, Boba - Dr Firdousa's mother - initiated negotiations with Raja Begum regarding Dr Firdousa's return to Mir Manzil. The negotiations lasted three months and ended with one condition. Shaheen, barely a toddler at the time, was to be left at Chinar Ghar. Raja Begum was utterly against the idea that the second daughter, whom she refused to call by name, should accompany Dr Firdousa to Mir Manzil.

'Iqbal would rather be one child less than two daughters and no son,' she had said to end the negotiations. The three desperate Mamoos, fearing that Raja Begum might leave Dr Firdousa at Chinar Ghar for the rest of her life, readily offered to look after the child as long as Raja Begum wished. '...As long as I am alive,' she said aloud to downplay the inviolability of their selfless gesture.

Shaheen grew up in the large and rambling Chinar Ghar, where three Mamoos and Boba lived in peace. There, the beggars got the meals of their choice because Boba prepared for them the same dishes that she cooked for other guests at the house, who were mostly friends of the Mamoos. 'What shall I get you, Kaka?' she would shout at the stranger emerging from the street door. 'Wait, and you'll get what you want.'

She invited all and sundry to spend the cold nights and days of harsh sun in its insulated corridors. Strangers got lost in its web-like configuration. Friends

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

of each Mamoo often entered the rooms of other Mamoos, even those who were not their friends, so in the end, all Mamoos shared all their friends.

Children who came to eat apples got in through the windows and left through the doors without meeting any impediment of choice. 'No one will ever lose his way in Chinar Ghar,' Boba said to those left clueless in its network of rooms, '... unless misled by his own heart.'

As a toddler, Shaheen discovered a new room, a new corridor and invariably new people every day. It was her universe and time was held in suspension in there by the thick mud-walls. As she roamed on her all-fours, the house seemed so large that it was impossible for her little mind to conceive that anything else could exist beyond it.

The house was built by the great-grandfather of the three Mamoos, whose name, like their own, had been trampled over by the ill fate that befell him. After trudging through the winding ways around the great mountains, he found himself face to face with the irretrievable remains of a Hindu Temple on the banks of Jhelum. He did not need to demolish the structure because his design had inherent similarities with the essence of the dilapidated temple. With the giant's strength that he had garnered in the Persian deserts and during his numerous philanthropic expeditions, he rebuilt the structure in such a way that if anyone ever came to search for the temple remains, he would find it

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

difficult to locate his own position in the world around him.

At that time, he was the only architect in the valley of Kashmir who could explain the intricacies of a design that was so universal and yet inexplicable for a commoner. Masons, carpenters and labourers who built the intricate structure - resembling the needlework flowers-leaves-in-loops - themselves did not know what they were constructing and were led by the great-grandfather himself in and out of the house during the days of construction.

Nevertheless, the great-grandfather lost his two sons and his own life to the great plague of Spanish flu at the beginning of the twentieth century. His third son, the grandfather of the Mamoos, had been forgotten by his mother in a room she could not locate for the rest of her days. The left-out son survived on the vegetation that grew abundant on the damp mud-walls for so long that when he came out, he was the family's only survivor. Outside, the city of Srinagar had been reduced to eleven families by the wrath of the plague.

He had been lost to his mother so young that he could not recall his own name nor of his parents. All he remembered was that his father planted a Chinar sapling wherever he found space. In reverence of his obscure past, he named the house Chinar Ghar and refused to take on any assumed name himself.

The orphaned nomad he married died during the first childbirth. The baby boy that was born was named Sultan, the king. Sultan roamed in the uncluttered

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

streets of Srinagar, breathing the fresh air of apple orchards and moving waters. He was so fond of apples that he turned half the courtyard of Chinar Ghar into an apple orchard. He did not go inside the house after the birth of Chota Mamoo. Despite Boba's ardent requests and lamentations, Sultan spent his nights under the apple branches and sold used Western clothes in the streets of Srinagar until his death.

One day, Shaheen entered a room with no windows but numerous doors. The room was so dark that it was impossible to tell whether it was day or night. She got lost and did not find any man or woman, known or stranger, until an old beggar, who could barely see because of a thick mantle of cataracts, heard her cries after three days. He had come for lunch and, after conveying what meals he wanted to eat, had gone in to wash his hands but took a wrong turn in the dark corridor. He missed his lunch and found the toddler when the day's last *Azan* was called out. Shaheen was starved and could barely breathe. Since that day, on the sound advice of Boba, Mamoos kept her outside the house.

They could not keep her in the large courtyard because twenty-two neighbourhood boys had gone missing in the tall vegetation that grew abound on the land made super-fertile by regular floods of Jhelum. Although the elders had gone as far as the riverbank and under the seven bridges, the disappearance of twenty-two boys remained a mystery. They had to engage stout labourers to cut the vegetation every week

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

to ensure the weeds did not swallow the apple orchard on the side of the courtyard towards the river.

So, Shaheen grew up outside the house. There, without any fatherly vigil and motherly attention, she roamed free in the streets of Ratta Latta with other derelicts, mostly boys. She grew up like them - uncouth and inconsiderate. When she got angry, she howled like a wild animal. Her shrieks frightened the stray dogs. When she was old enough, she refuted the allegations that she had suckled the stray bitches near the grave-shrine to quench the thirst of her babyhood. But long after she had moved to Mir Manzil, the neighbourhood boys copied her style of urinating against the electric poles with one leg raised in the air.

At times when she felt lonely and disgruntled, she would embark on monologues of obscenity, oaths, and curses of such ferocious intensity that the entire Ratta Latta was forced to come running to her three Mamoos, pleading to settle the little girl's demand. But her demand, which was so baffling even for the little child herself, was much more than what the three loving Mamoos could offer. Their only choice was to offer her favourite food-apple-because it was the first name that she had spoken and not cursed. In fact, they could dissuade her from sucking on her thumb using an apple. Boba had feared that she might eat her fingers until she gave her an apple once in the hope that the child would be attracted by its charming red colour. But the toddler smelled it with closed eyes and, without being told

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

what to do, held it between her two small, chubby hands and started munching it.

Nevertheless, in the course of her monologues, which she picked up from the beggars near the grave-shrine; her razor-sharp voice underwent a gradual but imperceptible change. It became hoarser and thicker as she grew up, making people confuse her for a boy when she spoke. This was why she was the first girl in Ratta Latta to form a dog squad to frighten the stray dogs and earned the street name Rani - the queen.

At first, she chased away the pups, hitting them with little sticks. Then she ran after the male dogs alone and hurled stones at them until she grew large enough to frighten the bitches. It is said that she did not throw stones at the bitches, but the remains of apples that she ate all through her childhood.

In winter, the dogs managed to retain their territory by clambering down to the exposed riverbed. They ate, shat, and made love under the bridges and on the riverbed of Jhelum. It was during summers when the river swelled and threatened to crash its bunds that the dogs suffered the most. The poor animals fought all summer with the dogs of nearby Tajir Mohalla and came to Ratta Latta only at night to nurse their wounds.

Long after Shaheen was brought to Mir Manzil, Tanvir, Bada Mamoo's only son, took over as the leader of the dog squad but could not equal the threat that the dogs had suffered at the hands of Shaheen, the Rani. The poor fellow did not know that he smelled different.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

When Shaheen was eventually brought to Mir Manzil on the insistence of her elder sister, Rukhsana Iqbal, no one bothered to evaluate the weird tone of her voice, or look into the anomaly of her name, or correct the whacky ways she behaved in public and at home, or do something about the state of her yellow teeth and bizarre transformation of the colour of her skin. When Rukhsana pointed out the missing 'a', no one heeded her. The disappointment of Shaheen's birth was only aggravated when she came to Mir Manzil.

At Mir Manzil, no one lost sleep over the occurrence of grenade attacks, least of all when Shaheen reported it. They hated her for her love of extremes, for bringing in the news that vacillated from extreme good to extreme bad, for either kneeling on the cobbled courtyard and crying in submission for forgiveness or standing on the grapevine framework and thrashing people with stinging nettles.

Once, when Raja Begum, in an attempt to reassure Iqbal of his loss in business matters, said that one should have something for life to continue, Shaheen had claimed: 'everything or nothing.' From that day on, the people of Mir Manzil did not consider whatever she had to say. And therefore, when she was late from college, they did not ask her the reason for the delay. Instead, they continued to wait - anxiously - for the Middleman, the matchmaker. It was the third day in succession that he had not turned up. And when they noticed that Shaheen had not brought the gift for Rukhsana's upcoming betrothal, they somehow felt

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

relieved. Raja Begum fervently believed that celebrating happiness before it had actually arrived was an omen of disrepute.

Earlier that day, Dr Firdousa went out on her usual moribund round of the neighbourhood, scaring kids off to school. She walked with clenched jaws and measured steps. Her head was always covered with a dupatta, and she wore her white doctor's apron clean and starched. Holding in her right hand a metallic syringe fitted with a four-inch sparkling needle, she passed from house to house, asking if 'they' were getting ready for school.

The custom had long ago lost its charm and kids - who held and operated real automatic guns - no longer got scared off by four-inch needles. But Dr Firdousa, for the sake of appearances, could not give up the custom of once revered doctors. People only answered out of habit, some out of obligation, and some purely out of pity for a woman with two daughters and no son.

To all the women who asked Dr Firdousa about the state of the nuptials of Rukhsana, she said, 'This afternoon, *Insha-Allah*.' So, by the time Shaheen was home, Dr Firdousa was contemplating Wednesday's morning round. And when Shaheen reported the grenade explosion, she decided the incident as her answer to the following morning's inquiries: *The Middleman probably got stuck in the crackdown after the blast.*

Khwaja Iqbal Mir, a misplaced and disturbed man, was consumed by ceaseless smoking. Although Raja

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Begum also smoked *Hooka* - which she did wherever she pleased - Iqbal smoked alone in his room, even during the days of fasting. On other days, some childhood friends gave him company in the evening.

They called him Khwaja Sahb. Raja Begum called him 'Yekka', the diminutive of Iqbal. In the neighbourhood, he was known as Tall Mir because of his lanky frame. He wore a grey tweed *Pherran* during all four seasons. His plain black hair, which he kept long and oiled merely out of a resilient habit, reached his shrinking shoulders and gave him not only an even lankier look but also increased his forlorn appearance.

He had come out of his room thinking that the Middleman had come. He coughed out the last dregs of the smoke as he walked. But when he saw Shaheen entering through the street door, he stopped and chuckled with misery: 'Look what I came out for!'

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Chapter Two

Despite having resolved to, and despite his numerous assurances to himself to forget the grey-eyed girl, Rizwan could not stop himself from coming to Lal Chowk. He sat on the chipped edge of the cold cement bench inside Pratap Park, all set to violate his pledge. Although he was cross with himself for succumbing to perception, uncertainty and the promise of pleasure flooded his heart. Sometimes, he was hurled into an exotic darkness. His guts felt as if a thick slime was churning slowly inside him, and he was helpless before it.

He had felt the same churning when soldiers occupied the Kashmir Indoor Stadium. He was thrown, unceremoniously, out of his arena and into a life of anonymity that he loathed. Unlike his buddies, who took to guns to avenge themselves on the soldiers for occupying their arena, and met the fate that guns inevitably attract, Rizwan decided otherwise. Although he too was tempted to swim with the tide, he waited and found an alternative - the path of eternity.

Now, he was at the edge of that timeless path, purely out of his own volition. He remembered Samir's words: 'Attention alone is at your command...'

He allowed himself to calm down by breathing slowly and considered giving up the quest once more before getting into it. He deliberated hard and

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

concluded that it was a mad pursuit, and felt completely defeated. He rose from the bench like an apparition - for good - but without any conviction. Amidst that moody spring Wednesday, he sat on the bench nonetheless, inspired by a sudden dark and bewitching hope that it would be his last such transgression.

The previous night, he had thought about the bright -grey-eyed girl until the hour of his meditation. In the early, vague moments, a crude reminder of the day's activities floated in his awareness like sludge on molten gold. Rizwan did not attend to it. It passed. Moments later, after a patch of passing blankness, in the crowd of faceless people appeared the wrinkled face of the blind man whom he had deserted at the sight of the bright-grey eyes. Once his thoughts wandered toward the pair of bright-grey eyes, he failed to reconcile with the feeling of shame bubbling inside him.

Until dawn, he contemplated the tall girl without any desire to extricate himself from her. The shape of her face slipped between the gaps in his thoughts like water through desperate fingers. He fell asleep in an attempt to recreate her image. He woke up to the soothing call of *Fajr Azan* and opened his eyes under the shadow of a headache.

For the entire morning, he braced himself for erasing her from his memory. Yet, as he ventured into his memory to retrieve and eliminate her, his mind eluded him. He could not think beyond the resolute memory of his mentor, Samir Pandita, and at one point, he nearly erased him by mistake when his mother, Nishat Bibi, called him to come down for breakfast.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

'You must leave all this championship vampionship behind,' said Nishat Bibi. 'Go out in the sun. Do something new. Find some occupation. Sins-of -mine and nothing else!'

While she complained nonstop, Mansoor, his father, conversed with Radio Pakistan, contesting the authenticity of the news they broadcasted concerning Kashmir. He termed the contents of the news as bombastic and considered Radio Pakistan and Akaashwani nothing but 'propaganda machinery'. However, he did not miss a single news item on either station. 'I'm attached to my enemies,' he often replied to Nishat Bibi's protests about why would anyone listen to them in the first place if they knew they would lie. '...because I am compelled to hear both of them.'

Mansoor Malik was not very tall but very pragmatic about life. He believed that the armed rebellion had arisen purely out of impatience and not necessity, as people claimed. That reason alone was enough for him to remain silent outside the walls of his courtyard.

'Shush!' Nishat Bibi often hushed him with a frown. 'They might hear you.'

Nevertheless, Rizwan fought the rising resignation within him as he listened to his father's bitter monologue directed at the unreachable newsreader in Islamabad. In an attempt to placate his obstinate urge, Rizwan decided to take a look at the grey-eyed girl from a distance, hoping to ease the surge of anxiety and find some peace for meditation.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

The cold of the cement bench roused him from his reflections. He detached himself from his inner world and, for the first time, looked around. Inside the centre of Pratap Park - on the new-born turf, in the concrete tank of seven sad fountains, and on the crazy-paving footpath along the Information Building across the Residency Road - rainwater had gathered in shallow puddles. Deep inside the puddles, one could see the inverted fragments of the world above. Rizwan remembered how, in his childhood, he wanted to reach the sky simply by falling through a puddle. He always fell but never reached the sky. He would only end up muddying his shalwars in the endeavour.

However, that Wednesday, he did not have time to watch the sky beneath his feet as girls gushed over the footpaths in torrents. It was three o'clock already, and the March sun had broken through the uncertain veil of clouds. The grey sky was soon bathed in stunning sunshine. Rizwan felt an itch bloom under his skin.

Uniform-clad girls passed under the blank hoarding frames that had been clothed in cinema hoardings before the uprising. The girls swelled the already bustling footpaths, skipped over the potholes and puddles, dribbled around the scattered cart markets selling *Eid* goodies, went in and out of garments and cosmetics shops, bought the items they didn't need and asked for the ones that didn't exist; giggled continually and swayed their bodies in a carefree panache.

They stopped the minibuses in the middle of the road and hurried into the three-wheeled black-and-yellow Bajaj auto-rickshaws. As the girls moved like a

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

strong, captivating tide, the entire Lal Chowk was electrified by the abundance of their perfume.

Exasperated by the rush of so many girls, and the sudden heat of the moment, Rizwan became an easy victim of itching. Ever since he had given up practising badminton, the winters dried his skin so much that even the consumption of pickle would arouse a severe itch in his whole body.

The moment the first girl passed by him, hot-prickly needles began to rise from his lower back. From there, they hurried along his thighs, skipped the buttocks, pricked up to his calves, and settled in his defenceless feet. Slowly, they rose to his midriff, spread over his deltoids, and pricked his shoulders. As the needles reached his neck, he shook himself in a slow writhing motion, feeling stung by one hundred thousand bees in one unending moment.

By the time Rizwan was writhing, the needles had already reached his face, were all over his head, buzzed in his skull, overflowed, and had started spilling over from his facial pores to disappear in the crisp spring air. They ran down his arms and spilled over from the fingertips under his spatula-shaped nails. When the traffic allowed, he hurried across the road to the shade of the Information Building and let the agitated needles recede.

He watched the girls - giggling and talking loudly, enjoying their short spell of privilege and freedom. They walked and talked carefree, commanding attention at will. They all looked the same as if it was

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

just one girl reflected by abundant mirrors on the Residency Road.

For Rizwan, to single out the grey-eyed girl among the numerous uniformed girls was frustrating. It seemed impossible. An acrid taste of mud invaded his mouth, and he was reminded of his mother: *Mud is the sign of defeat.*

It was then, almost at the end of the throng, when the needles had receded, and he had given up the hope of seeing her, that he saw her pass by him so closely that he was intrigued by her smell, which could only be described like the smell of water left unattended for days in a container.

The tempest of his slimy guts eased into a blissful breathing in his belly. He was calm and stood transfixed like a rock. He realised that it was true beyond any doubt that elusive eternity lay in the moment. He wanted time to remain frozen as it was, but she walked ahead without even having noticed him.

In that brief moment, he had seen her as if there was no other vision in his memory. Her fleshy cheeks, deformed by deep dimples of innocence, were clouded by a dark mantle that reflected the stunning March sun. Her intensely black hair fell over her ears up to her well -formed shoulders. Her chin, made prominent by the vigour of her hidden energy, was unusually smooth. Rust-coloured pimples were scattered on her forehead and near the soft earlobes. It was hard for Rizwan, even with effort, to connect her bright-grey, wild eyes with any simple idea of humanity. She was divine.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Moments later, when he had recovered from the trance, he recollected that the plump, blonde girl with the boy's haircut was walking side by side with her. He also recollected that they were talking leisurely while they passed by him.

Nonetheless, in those times of extreme inhibition and omnipresent fear of death, when girls had become the sole object and goal of the boys' dreams who walked up and down the Residency Road, Rizwan was madly drawn to her and felt the first signs of adult life.

He saw her getting mixed up in the crowd of people walking towards Ghanta Ghar. Her head floated up again near the Insurance Building, ravaged by the first big explosion in Srinagar; its hoarding said in large Urdu letters, '*Salamati ke liye...Zindagi Beema'* in red on a yellow background, still intact.

He managed to beat the crowd and watched her from behind the heap of fresh dates piled up on a cart until she and her plump, blonde friend were past the Ghanta Ghar. When she was gone - disappeared in the mob that overfilled the Tata minibuses and hung about its back and sides like flexing goitres - Rizwan was deep in the chaos of his desire. He wondered if he could afford not to see her again.

On Thursday, Rizwan looked at her from a distance. As usual, she was accompanied by her plump, blonde friend. Rizwan thought of talking to her. With every passing moment, his willingness to speak to her became resolute, and without waiting any longer, he decided to let her know of his intentions. He felt a heavy load taken off his chest. By the time he had taken

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

the final decision, she was lost in the maddening *Eid* rush.

Rizwan began to look for her. When he spotted her head bobbing in the distance, he hurried in his steps. He saw her enter an old gift shop. The plump, blonde friend followed her. He waited outside, rehearsing his words. When she came out holding a gift-wrapped package against her chest, Rizwan couldn't dare face her and turned around. His heart was about to explode in his chest. He took a few deep breaths and then followed them until the duo split near the Ghanta Ghar because of a moving cart coming from the other direction.

She was trapped in the labyrinth of the carts selling dates while her blonde friend walked outside the cart line. When the moving cart seller stopped in front of her, she turned around to change her course. It was there that Rizwan faced her at close quarters and looked straight into her eyes. This time, he stood his ground and, despite his fluttering heart, asked her, 'Excuse me.'

He was taken aback by her loud and curt reaction, 'What?' Then she looked hard into his eyes the way elders do to frighten little kids, and did some playful acrobatics of her bright-grey pupils. Rizwan was alarmed by her wild stare. His heart skipped a beat, but he somehow maintained his composure. Then, all of a sudden, as if swayed by an impulse, she hurried in her steps and joined her blonde friend. Soon, they were gone, lost again in the crowd.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Rizwan's heart was still pounding in his chest. He had not only done the impossible but had also brazenly broken a rule dictated by the militants and society at large. He looked around, and, to his utter relief, no one was looking at him. *Eid* preparations had engrossed the entire Lal Chowk.

On the other side of the road, near the entrance of the Forest Lane, a group of black-veiled women were talking to unveiled uniformed girls. They were cloaked from top to bottom by their black *burqas*, the local variety of the veil. Only their enraged pupils were visible through the netting around the eye slits cut in the *burqa*. 'I'm telling you, girls,' said the group leader loudly so that other girls could also hear her. 'Practice veil, or else you will learn a bitter lesson.'

Nevertheless, at that moment, when Shaheen was staring hard at Rizwan to frighten him, a neighbour of Mir's, who had just collected her nine-year-old unveiled daughter from Mallinson Girl's High School, was coming out from Forest Lane. To avoid the Veil Enforcement Brigade, she turned right towards the Tyndale Biscoe School and then walked across the road toward the date-carts. When she was dragging her daughter near Ghanta Ghar, she saw Shaheen talking eye-to-eye with a young man, and on the very next day, informed Dr Firdousa.

That morning, Dr Firdousa, out on her usual round of the neighbourhood, was scaring off kids to school as usual. When she entered the courtyard of the neighbouring woman, she raised her right hand with the

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

metallic syringe and asked in a feigned-hoarse voice if the kids behaved well and were ready for school.

The woman from inside did not say, *"Yes, they are sweet kids, very obedient, doctor Sahb,"* as was expected. Instead, the woman pushed the kitchen screen door wide open and looked at the doctor with pity. 'You've more important things to do than driving kids off to school.'

She came on the porch, led in Dr Firdousa by her arm, offered her a warm *Kangri* and related the case of the tall boy with black brows whom she had seen with her own eyes talking to Shaheen. 'Heaven forefend... enemies and evil-wishers...' she passed her forefinger from left ear to right. 'He even gave her a gift-wrapped package.'

Dr Firdousa, knowing that gossip travelled faster and farther than the truth, asked her when she had seen that. 'What can I tell you now, sister, in this holy month?' The woman said. Dr Firdousa did not dare inquire further because she recalled having seen Shaheen with a gift-wrapped package the previous afternoon. Before going into another house, however, she felt a colossal sinking in her stomach and abandoned her round.

When she entered the Mir Manzil courtyard, a turmeric-yellow bitch had just finished excreting in front of the street door. Dr Firdousa was alarmed and shooed the relieved bitch away. As she advanced into the courtyard, dog shit was spread all around in tiny, brown heaps of varying shades. At that moment, Raja Begum, looking out from the kitchen window, shouted

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

at her. 'Now Mir Manzil has become the favourite place for dogs to shit. Ask Gopa to clean it up.'

Gopa, whose name could have been anything but familiar to Mirs in particular and Kashmiris in general, was a dark, round fellow who did not even know his own origins. He always wore a round black-and-white chequered cap and had been with the Mirs ever since he could eat with his own hands. No one doubted his loyalty because Khwaja Samad Mir had brought him into the household. No one knew his origins, nor could anyone guess his background because of the accent he had when speaking Kashmiri. He could speak no other language.

Dr Firdousa did not lose her poise because of this new dog nuisance, nor was she upset by the acts of her daughter. She was tormented because of the turbulence caused by the memory of her colourful days at Lal Chowk with Dr Nizam, the professor of medicine.

He was a short man with a round, chubby face, thin, jet-black hair and a broad, sparkling forehead. They had met in the classroom during his first lecture in Elementary Pathology when she fell in love with his articulate teaching method. He was married to the Dean's daughter and, as such, was not very keen in public. But Dr Firdousa, known for her flamboyancy in her younger days, met him at Lal Chowk on Saturday afternoons. Their best times were spent holding hands and strolling along the Bund, where they mingled with the blonde tourists to avoid being recognised.

So, when Shaheen came home that afternoon, Dr Firdousa did not take the branches of stinging nettle to

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

spank her in the courtyard the way she would have done years earlier. Instead, she called her in the kitchen, put her hand on her left shoulder, and gently asked her to stop doing what she was doing. 'You'd do better stay home than go around spoiling the honour of the family.'

Shaheen made it quite clear that she did not understand what she was told. She pouted her flaky lips and sometimes scratched the pimple on her cheek, which had swollen to the point of bursting. Dr Firdousa did not relent, caught her by the wire-hard hair, and told her in clear terms that she would no longer hang with the boys at Lal Chowk or else...

'No,' Shaheen snapped back, 'I don't hang with any damn boys out there.' With that curt answer, she freed her hair and hurried to her room.

No one was more astute than Dr Firdousa in concealing the signs of love, and she knew that Shaheen had more resolve than she had in her younger days. She contemplated the nonchalant steps thumping on the wooden stairs as Shaheen climbed upstairs to her room. Just then, Dr Firdousa heard Raja Begum greet someone in the courtyard. It was the Middleman, engaged in Rukhsana's nuptials.

He was a stocky little man with fat eyes, wearing a worn-out black *Karakul*. He always wore a grey *Pherran*. And he had the annoying habit of munching air before speaking. He spoke sentences in little chunks to give an itemised measure of his information's worth.

Khwaja Iqbal Mir also heard the greetings of the Middleman from his *Hooka* room. When he saw his

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

wife and mother looking at each other in disbelief, he anticipated his dread and asked: 'Have they said 'no'?'

No one answered him. Not even the Middleman. For a moment, it looked like Iqbal had gathered all the darkness from the valley of Kashmir. He did not attempt to answer his own dreadful inquiry either.

In his whole life, Iqbal Mir had not wished for more than two things. Without a doubt, Rukhsana, his elder daughter - the apple of his eyes - was one of them, which he claimed with pride. The other - the cause of his ruination, the challenge of his father's unparalleled legacy - he kept confined to the walls of his devastated heart. At the moment the Middleman confirmed that the nuptials of Rukhsana had been unsuccessful, Iqbal became conscious of his smoke-filled breath and returned to his room, overcome by the shame of his transgression.

At *Iftaar* on that day, when the Middleman had left with a suggestion of another family, Mirs were surrounded by a transient gloom. However, Raja Begum held her nerve. The first thing she did after breaking her fast with a glass of plain water, as she had been doing for years, was to settle for a relaxing session of smoking. She smoked in the kitchen where no one talked. She studied every face that was there and was so moved by their mourning outlook, the claustrophobic silence, and the mantle of darkness on Iqbal's face that, without realising the obvious infringement, she passed on the *Hooka* to her son, Iqbal, who, unnerved by the unexpected gesture, could do no more than take the bamboo pipe and suck on it.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Whenever grief struck the Mirs, mother and son would invariably become united. When Shaheen was born, they stood as one against Dr Firdousa's return to Mir Manzil. When eventually, Dr Firdousa returned to Mir Manzil without year-old Shaheen, mother and son were equally indifferent to her. Although they had never shared the *Hooka* at any point in the past, the shock of the failed nuptials of their beloved Rukhsana united their indulgence. From that day on, the duo would smoke together without any reservation, anywhere in the house, whenever they pleased.

For Dr Firdousa, the trouble was two-fold. Not only had she to live with the insult of a rejected relationship but also a united adversary. The pain of her earlier days was revived. 'Entire Kashmir is half the doctor in the first place,' Raja Begum had said to belittle her medical expertise when Dr Firdousa had prescribed her to sit in a chair instead of cross-legged, to ease her sore knees. However, her immediate priority was to know if Shaheen's nuisance had been the cause of the rejection.

The Middleman had said nothing.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Chapter Three

Rizwan was so consumed by desperation that even the prospect of *Eid* did not gladden him. The college would officially close for two days. But practically, it would take the girls an entire week to come back from the celebrations. Alone and incapacitated, he grew restless in his low-ceiling room.

Below, in the living room, Nishat Bibi was glued to Radio Pakistan, waiting impatiently to hear about the possibility of *Eid-ul-Fitr* on Saturday. Her sudden act of attachment to Radio Pakistan confounded Mansoor, as always. 'Because we pray to the same *Allah-talla*,' Nishat Bibi replied fervently. 'And we share the same moon.'

It was Friday evening, the twenty-ninth day of *Ramazan*, and the mosque loudspeakers were quiet. There was no sign of *Taraweeh* from any corner of the city. *Eid* could be tomorrow. Pakistan was good at hunting down witnesses for the citation of the crescent of *Shawwal*.

With every passing moment, Rizwan's fear was morphing into a depressing, concrete reality. The mere thought crushed him. It was impossible for him, by any stretch of imagination, to wait that long. His eyes were already aching to see her. The colour of her pupils coloured his day and night. He felt an unbearable burden that overwhelmed him, and he wanted to do

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

nothing but cry bitterly; only his shame didn't permit him to cry in love. The prospect of not seeing her tomorrow made her sweeter and more desirable. He would die or go mad if he didn't see her tomorrow.

Till ten o'clock, he was unable to calm himself. A burgeoning storm in his lungs made his breathing rapid and erratic. He exhaled long sighs and said a clear 'no' to dinner despite Nishat Bibi's warnings that it would annoy the house angels.

He lived in a state of resignation till a distant mosque loudspeaker, late at night, supplied the resigned signs of *Taraweeh*. As usual, the reverberations of the loudspeaker incited the frenzied moans of the stray dogs. But today, the dog moans did not arouse a feeling of vexation in Rizwan; instead, his heart rejoiced. These barks heralded love, and he felt a deep affection for it. He loved all sorts of sounds as long as they declared the deferment of *Eid*. *Eid* would be on Sunday; he could see her tomorrow.

That night, after praying the *Taraweeh*, he could not sleep owing to restlessness. The inescapable question of what he would tell her tomorrow haunted him. With what words could he possibly counter her 'what?' How would he steel his heart to face her stare and retain his composure while her bright-grey eyes bored into him? But, try as he might, he could not conjure up her entire face in his mind's eye. Her fair-skinned face was ever so elusive in the grey world that surrounded him. The night dragged on, and gradually, his breathing eased as he fell into a stupor.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

At around one o'clock, he was woken up by what seemed like a nightmare, only it wasn't.

Shivering in her maroon kameez-shalwar, Nishat Bibi shook his shoulder while he was in his bed. 'Hurry up,' she said loudly. 'They must be coming.'

Rizwan realised that she had no head cover. Instantly, he was taken by the notion that it was a crackdown. Mothers threw morals to the winds when soldiers raided their homes.

When soldiers occupied the Indoor Stadium and Rizwan's buddies ran away to become militants, Nishat Bibi guarded his room on the ground floor like a soldier. She came down from her bedroom often during the night, called out Rizwan's name near his room, and did not return until she heard him say: *"Yes Mother, I'm here."*

Mansoor was frustrated by Nishat Bibi's calls in the middle of the night, and one night, in utter dismay, he came out of his room in his nightclothes and asked her to shut up. 'I won't let go of my only son,' she replied with a deadpan face. 'Even if I've to stay awake all night.'

The following day, Mansoor dismantled his walnut wood bed and brought the pieces downstairs. He assembled the bed in Rizwan's small room and asked Rizwan to sleep upstairs in their room. 'Now, if he has to run away,' he said with satisfaction to Nishat Bibi, '...he'll have to cross your door first.'

In his first-floor room, Rizwan stood up like a bolt and dressed hastily for the crackdown. He was still under the influence of his thoughts. He thought of the

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

grey-eyed girl whom he was due to see in the afternoon. His lips eased into an involuntary smile. But crackdowns could last longer sometimes. He wondered if it was another twist of his miserable fate. *Eid* had spared him; now it was the crackdown. Both were out of his control. He shrugged his shoulders as he adjusted the sweater over his body.

As the drowsiness of sleep wore off gradually, he heard the mosque loudspeakers blaring: '*Hazraat Eid* is today. *Hazraat*...' From the ground floor, the creak of the front door opening and closing confirmed the news. Rizwan cursed the ill-omened occurrence. Although this was far from a rare event, Rizwan became agitated. How could it be in the middle of the night? But it was as it was: *Eid-ul-Fitr*, not a crackdown.

Mansoor was already out in the courtyard sharpening two folding knives on the grindstone in total darkness. When Rizwan came down, Mansoor tested the sharpness of the knives by brushing off flakes from his fingernails in the pale light thrown by the lantern. Nishat Bibi had hung a lit kerosene lantern on a nail in the house wall. She had also placed a water bowl and the trash can near Mansoor.

'Here, take it,' said Mansoor with dismay. 'Thank your lords across the border.' While he was handing one folding knife to his sleepy son, the street door opened with a familiar creak, and the crowd of neighbours burst in to get their fowls slaughtered. Those who carried burning candles or kerosene lanterns blew them out.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

'Even our sleep isn't ours,' Mansoor told his sleepy neighbours. He took one fowl at a time while the shivering neighbours formed a long, winding queue in the courtyard that stretched beyond the street door and ended at the crossroads near the barber's shop.

People greeted each other *Eid Mubarak*.

Mansoor held one helpless bird in his hands, holding its neck and twitching legs. Then he pinned the bird on the ground with his right foot on its claws. Long years of practice had attuned him to the bird's anatomy, and he hardly needed to look or think about the process anymore. People all across the Peer Wari came to him for slaughtering their fowls. Although he was a teacher by profession, he had been slaughtering fowls as a little boy. His father had taught him so.

Mansoor dropped a handful of water into the stretched-out mouth of the bird with his right hand while his left hand opened its beak. Then he lifted the sharpened folding knife from the ground by feel and looked at the invisible clouds in the sky. As he looked down at the helpless bird under his feet, he chanted *Bismillah-hi-Allah-o-Akbar* and nicked the feathery throat of the bird in the pale light of the lantern.

The sharp edge cut the fowl with ease. As a thin stream of blood spurted from the throat of the bird, he increased the pressure of his right foot and his left hand on the fowl's legs and head so that the fowl could twitch its dying body without his grip faltering. He let the bird give up its soul without any hurry. Then he handed the limp fowl to Rizwan so he could cut its beak and legs on a flat wooden piece.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

When the first fowl was still in Rizwan's hands, stray dogs were already roaming in the street and had begun their nightlong fight for the fowl entrails. Later, when the blue of the morning had accumulated in the courtyard, and both Mansoor and Rizwan were exhausted, Nishat Bibi blew out the lantern and asked the neighbours to come in for a cup of saffron-*Kehwa*.

Exactly at that moment, when Rizwan stood up from his haunches in a sudden response to hunger, he wondered if the grey-eyed girl, too, had gotten up from her sleep and was holding a fowl in her hands.

She wasn't. When the midnight *Eid* was announced, Raja Begum was the first to appear in the courtyard. She got up lazily and awakened Gopa in his room on the ground floor. Then she knocked at Rukhsana's door. Then, dragging her skewed wooden staff, she walked across the cobbled courtyard in absolute darkness to loosen her joints before heading towards the kitchen.

But long before the loudspeakers awakened Raja Begum, Shaheen had already been up, knowing about *Eid* with her street-smart instinct. In fact, she did not sleep the whole night, waiting for the moment when the mosque loudspeaker would contradict itself.

Earlier that day, Shaheen had wagered a bet of one hundred and one rupees with Bublee Pandita, the blonde girl with a boy's haircut, that it would be a midnight *Eid* because India had declared *Eid* on Sunday and Pakistan had made no declaration. Bublee was alarmed by the explanation and could only laugh it out.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Shaheen went out stealthily from the Mir Manzil courtyard at midnight. The dogs ceased barking at once and scurried to farther places where Shaheen's scent could not reach. The instantaneous calm was so unexpected that Samir Pandita, in the first-floor prayer-room of Pandita Lodge near the crossroads, sitting cross-legged and in absolute focus on 'OM', was alarmed. He came out of the trance. Eyes still closed, he wondered in the darkness what crisis had befallen humanity in the middle of the night to cause such silence.

Moments later, Shaheen called out from the courtyard, 'Bublee...Bublee...Bublee...' He opened his eyes slowly in the darkness and got up from his cross-legged position. After he had loosened the joints of his knees, he walked quietly in the room by feeling its walls with his outstretched hands, crossed the cold corridor, reached Bublee's room, and knocked with his fingertips.

Before he could say it was a crackdown, Bublee spoke from inside. 'I knew it,' she said as resignedly as if it were a Monday morning. 'Shaheen told me it would happen, and now I owe her one hundred and one rupees. In fact,' she went on, 'I had lost the bet yesterday because I could not sleep the whole night knowing she can't be wrong.'

While the siblings were clarifying the midnight occurrence on either side of the closed door, Shaheen, standing in the dark courtyard, loosened her shalwar's string, slipped the shalwar over her cold thighs, sat

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

down on her haunches outside the courtyard washroom, and urinated abundantly.

Dr Jyoti Dhar Pandita, sleeping in her room, was dreaming that she was severing the umbilical cord of a baby that was her own but delivered by someone else. The liquor from the mother was gushing down with such a noisy splatter that she was awakened. When she opened her eyes, she was in her room, not the operation theatre, and all the paramedics were gone. She looked at the door. It was shut. She had to shake her head to clear her mind because the noise of the liquor was still splattering in her ears. She removed the quilt over her knees to confirm where she was at.

Once she was up, her confusion was overshadowed by the loud exchange of her kids in the corridor. Initially, she thought that it was a crackdown and the neighbourhood Muslim females had come in haste so that they could use the shield of her house to escape the wrath of soldiers. But when she heard Shaheen talking to Bublee and Samir, she sorted out the midnight confusion in her sleepy mind.

Shaheen refused to take the bet money. 'I won,' she said. 'Isn't that what I wanted?' Dr Jyoti Dhar Pandita burst into raucous laughter on her way to the kitchen to prepare saffron *Kehwa* for the girls while they talked loudly in the courtyard under the invisible clouds.

*

At Chinar Ghar, the first thing Boba did was to ask her sons to go to Mir Manzil and inform Raja Begum. When the trio replied in one voice that they must already have known because Mir Manzil was situated

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

closer to Jamia Masjid than Chinar Ghar, Boba did not argue with them. She walked to her room in slow, measured steps, got inside, took her white cover-all-*burqa* hanging from the nail on the wall between two windows, donned it without any haste, overturned the front flap to uncover her face so that she could see in the darkness, came back into the dark corridor, walked quietly to the porch, put on her feathery slippers, started walking to the street door and said to no one in particular, 'People yearn for one son, and I have three...' She kept on walking while the three sons could do little else but listen in a shamed silence. '... and look what I am reduced to ... in the middle of a holy night.'

It was then that Neelam Khanum, with her unsteady croaky voice, said aloud from her room so that everyone could hear her in the darkness, 'Time has come for you people to take charge of your lives.' It was so sudden a revelation that it seemed to come directly from the heavens. 'You only sneeze of your own volition,' she added.

Despite the revelation, Manjla Mamoo scurried after Boba to bring her back and offered to go to Mir Manzil himself.

'Wear your shoes first,' Boba said in a low motherly voice. 'Winter has not spared us yet.'

At that moment, when Manjla Mamoo was wearing his soft-leather shoes, from the back side of the Chinar Ghar, Fareed Lala, hearing the commotion, sent her son Tanvir to rescue Boba. 'Have fear of God,' she said in the darkness. No one heard her.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Manjla Mamoo took Tanvir with him to go to Mir Manzil. But all the way, he thought about the revelation with complete attention. At the same time, the two brothers, ashamed and immobile on the porch, also thought about the revelation without any distraction; *had the time come?*

But as soon as Manjla Mamoo and Tanvir returned with half a dozen chirping fowls, Boba had once again taken charge of the situation, and the revelation had lost its effect.

Neelam Khanum, convinced that she had struck at least her husband's heart once more, was mistaken. Bada Mamoo was once more at the mercy of his mother's prerogative. To placate her anger, he not only cut the fowls cheerfully but skinned them, disembowelled them, quartered them properly, kept the stomachs, kidneys, and livers in separate bowls, hurled the steamy intestines and the beak on the courtyard washroom tin-roof, washed and dried the birds and headed to Mir Manzil to return them to Raja Begum himself.

Two springs earlier, Neelam Khanum had seen Bada Mamoo at the seminar, debating whether force should be used to impose the veil on the women at the age of nine years. He was in the line of judges seated in the front row not because he was a scholar but because he was good at arranging people. In the vast and colourful tent-house, he was lost somewhere in his thoughts, and she had liked him that way. She had completely lost her way in the debate and was the only girl who did not win any prizes despite speaking with

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

a voice that incited tenderness in the hidden parts of the heart and obscured the mind completely.

The entire Kupwara village congratulated the girls who won the prizes and accompanied them to their respective homes by carrying them on the shoulders of young men.

Neelam Khanum, tall and completely veiled under her black *burqa*, was the only one left in the seminar tent-house. Amid the stationary houseboats, blue lotuses and long-necked swans painted on the canvas tent-house, Bada Mamoo, alone and at ease, was soundly asleep in a rented chair.

She failed to awaken him by brushing his long beard with the back of her right hand. Then she inserted the strands of his grey beard in his right nostril, and he awoke with a startling sneeze. When he opened his eyes, she asked him in her unsteady, croaky voice without giving him time to wake up completely, 'What have you thought about me?'

He was struck by her walnut breath that breached her silky black veil. 'I'm married,' he said to conceal the tenderness that her voice had caused in the most hidden parts of his heart.

'To how many wives?' She asked without any hesitation.

'One,' said Bada Mamoo, now completely enamoured.

'You are entitled to four,' she replied. 'Let's get married.'

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Their whirlwind love story had a short life, and that very evening, they were married in the courtyard of Green Mosque, Kupwara. Her mother waived all dowries and stated the blessings of a simple and swift marriage. She quoted from the sacred books how it had also been done in the past with the consent of God himself.

Despite the reference to God's consent, for three weeks, Bada Mamoo did not dare go back to Chinar Ghar. Although the news of his second marriage had already reached Chinar Ghar, no one believed it. Those who had accompanied him to adjudge the debate vouched for Bada Mamoo's second marriage but failed to convince the people because of their own disrepute.

No one believed it at Mir Manzil either, except for the forlorn Iqbal. 'I'm happy for him,' he said to himself in his *Hooka* room. 'At least he will repent less all his life.'

It was the gallant mother of Neelam Khanum, the revered Zoon Begum of Astan Mohalla, who, in her husky male voice, counselled Bada Mamoo and asked him to take his bride home because everybody in the entire valley of Kashmir must already know it. 'Besides,' she said in unequivocal terms, 'now you have been blessed with a chance to prove your manhood.'

The first thing Fareed Lala did on seeing her husband's tall and thin second wife was to take her stuff from her room and occupy an empty room at the other extreme of the house. With the help of her relatives and under the supervision of her teenage son,

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

she cut a doorway at the back of Chinar Ghar so that she did not have to face Neelam Khanum for the rest of her life.

Fareed Lala was mistaken completely because no one at Chinar Ghar or Mir Manzil had to face her as long as they lived. The only living person in Srinagar who had seen Neelam Khanum and faced her as and when he pleased was Bada Mamoo himself. Neelam Khanum did not take off her veil in the presence of anyone except her husband. 'It is a shame for other people,' she said in reply to an imaginary question, 'to look at someone who is someone else's wife.'

*

After the *Eid* prayers, knowing that the grey-eyed girl would not be there, Rizwan decided to go to Lal Chowk anyway, promising his mother to be back before lunch. He walked alone on the path the girl and her blonde friend had walked the day before. The entire Lal Chowk was deserted, and it only reeked of the terrible absence of the grey-eyed girl.

He started from the college gate, crossed M.A. Road and the link, and reached Residency Road. The sun was behind him. The cold March air nipped at his fingers, and he wished he had donned trousers so that he could slip his hands into its side pockets. But on all *Eid* days and during Friday prayers, he donned a Khan suit to avoid any difficulty in standing erect, bending the back while holding the knees with two spread-out hands, bowing in submission with the forehead and the tip of his nose touching the ground and sitting on his folded legs till the end of the prayers.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

As he walked along the footpath of the Information Building, he realised that deserted places made time and space expand. Breathing became easier, and an unfamiliar type of freedom pervaded the air.

During his college days, Rizwan roamed Lal Chowk with his buddies for hours together. When they had finished the class-work at Sri Pratap College, they ate *Chola-puri* at Shakti Sweets and window-shopped on Residency Road. Sometimes, they bunked college and watched a movie at Regal Cinema that Mansoor called '*Khail*' - a play. At night, Mansoor made Rizwan recount the story, often a love story, and they would discuss the *Khail* to the utter displeasure of Nishat Bibi. She fervently believed that movies corrupted young minds. But she liked his passion for badminton and happily gave him money to buy things he needed for the game.

Rizwan shopped at Olympian Sports Gear. He got his racket gutting done there, took free shuttlecocks from its fat owner, and dreamed of signing autographs when the school kids from Tyndale Biscoe School and Mallinson Girls' School appeared near Ghanta Ghar. His buddies waited for the girls of Girls College at three o'clock and took delight in their coquetry till the uniform-clad nymphs disappeared into overfilled minibuses. But Rizwan went to the stadium to practice.

When soldiers occupied the Kashmir Indoor Stadium, he suffered the wreck of his only dream. He was devastated. Inconsolable. He did not leave his house for days together. He spent most of his time in his room, in resigned silence, slept little and poorly,

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

and woke up in the middle of long wintery nights with the taste of mud on his tongue. He would then curse the soldiers and the uprising with equal disdain.

The recurrent dreams of a small, rudimentary aircraft flying sinuously among gigantic apple trees without bumping into anything suddenly deserted him. Now, he dreamt of an unfathomable, profound, and heavy darkness that smothered him. In the dream, when he tried to lift his hand, he couldn't. When he tried to shout in terror, his throat failed to produce any sound. Sometimes, it was evident in the dream that he was awake in a dark room filled with ashes, and his frozen limbs were not in his control. There were no windows in the dark room, only a solitary door. The door opened to a similar, dark room filled with ashes and a solitary door that led to another similar dark room, filled with ashes and a solitary door…

At times, the uproar of spectators wooing for his victory resounded in his head. He remembered hands closing in on mouths like seashells to heighten the screams: *Rizza...Rizza...Rizza.* The soul-raising screams reverberated inside the closed stadium under the pentagonal glass roof. On the bare concrete walls, his mates scrawled with charcoal in large letters… RIZZA PADUKONE, after he had beaten Nasir- the-Ace in qualifiers and was due to become the new State Badminton Champion. They raised him on their shoulders and ran a victory lap inside the arena. Every single detail that once lifted his soul now stabbed him with redoubled intensity. For the first time in his life,

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

he was without a dream and the mere thought of it caused a terrible tearing in the middle of his being.

Nevertheless, Rizwan saw that the revolving entrance door of Pratap Park was locked to prevent dogs from entering. He jumped over it, walked to the pool of seven sad fountains, and sat on the cold concrete bench. On the periphery of the dry concrete pool, dogs were dozing under the mild sunlight. In the distance, under the sprawling octopus of a Chinar and shielded by the tall, unkempt grass, a couple of *Charsis*, sitting with legs crossed, took drags in turns from a single cigarette. Rizwan wondered what Devil could drive a young man to such a thing as smoking *charas* for the rest of his life.

He lay against the cold back of the bench and gave himself up to the grandeur of the grey-eyed girl's open-stepped gait and the enigma of her bright-grey eyes. He realised that he could meet her only when circumstances allowed, but he could rejoice in her memories whenever he pleased.

At that moment, Shaheen had taken three dressed fowls from Bada Mamoo and was about to take the fourth one when she sneezed. 'Someone is missing me,' she said.

'Everyone at Chinar Ghar is missing you,' replied Bada Mamoo.

'Neelam Khanum too?'

Bada Mamoo was saved the disgrace of having to defend his awkward second marriage because, at that moment, the stocky little Middleman appeared from the street door. He had donned a new *Pherran* of dark

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

burgundy check on black wool. His head was covered by his only threadbare *Karakul*.

No one greeted him *Eid Mubarak*.

When Raja Begum saw him from the kitchen door, she walked to him with the haste of an apparition. She made large movements to walk faster with the help of her skewed staff so that she could keep the Middleman as far away from Shaheen as possible.

'What do you have today?' She asked him before he could greet her.

'I have come to make your *Eid* doubly happy,' he replied in slow, word-by-word utterance.

'What happiness are you talking about? You marred our *Eid*,' complained Raja Begum. 'Now, what have you come here for?'

'Let me give you the details over *Kehwa*.'

The Middleman did not give the Mirs any details about the refusal. He wanted them to forget it. Raja Begum and Iqbal might have agreed with the Middleman had it not been for Dr Firdousa. For her, the reason for the refusal was critical. Until she knew the reason, there was no point in initiating another relationship. If anything could cause trouble in the nuptials once, it could repeat itself.

Since the Middleman, constrained by his professional obligations, divulged nothing, Dr Firdousa refused to initiate another relationship.

'They are settled in Umrika,' said the Middleman.

There befell a sudden and unalterable silence.

*

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

On the third day of *Eid*, to get a realistic idea of her apprehensions, Dr Firdousa offered calcium tablets as a recourse for weak teeth and fragile bones. She knew that even a stone moved if anything free was on offer.

So, she stayed longer in each house, elaborating on the need to take calcium supplements for middle-aged and adolescent females. But all of them only felt sorry for Rukhsana's unsuccessful nuptials and said so. No one mentioned the name of Shaheen, even the one who had divulged her association with the boy having black brows.

The survey pleased Dr Firdousa. She felt redeemed. But despite the pleasant outcome, she considered it imprudent to leave Rukhsana's fate to the whim of chance. So, she made up her mind: *Shaheen was to stay home until Rukhsana was married off.*

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Chapter Four

Shaheen did not accede to the bizarre diktat of staying home for no reason. She did not waste her time demanding the reasons for holding her back, but decided to counter it straight away. Donning her grey-and-white uniform, she left the porch amid freaking shouts of Dr Firdousa, who snatched her bag at the front door.

Shaheen, swaying her empty hands in anger, walked beneath the grapevine, crossed the cobbled courtyard, and was about to open the street door when Dr Firdousa, with the help of Gopa, dragged her back.

Shaheen turned around, freed her arms, pushed Gopa away with the ferocity of a lioness, and wrestled with Dr Firdousa. She not only overpowered her mother but was successful in retrieving her bag as well. She looked down at her defeated mother with an evil grin, shook the bag lightly, slung it over her left shoulder, brushed her wrinkled uniform straight, and without setting her jumbled hair right, scurried out of the street door.

Dr Firdousa had to gather Iqbal and Raja Begum to help her stop Shaheen from going to college. When she explained the reason for her act, they did not disagree with her, despite their hidden longing to oppose her every move.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Raja Begum grabbed her skewed staff, crossed the street door with large open steps, and asked the team of vegetable monger, milkman, and the bread maker to bring back Shaheen, the piece-of-her-liver, who had left home without taking her medicine.

'It's urgent,' she said, trying to steady the wheeze of her asthmatic breathing. 'God forbid, she would die if she didn't take the necessary dose.'

Inspired by the moral strength of a frail grandmother, the entire market ran after Shaheen and stopped her in the narrow by-lanes near the crossroads. They haggled with her to get her back to Mir Manzil.

Shaheen, still under the influence of her blinding rage, embarked on monologues of obscenity, oaths and curses at the peak of her voice, causing the neighbouring women to crane their necks from their kitchen windows. Seeing that a public scandal was ensuing in the streets, they shut the windows and came out at their street doors.

The shopkeepers, unable to move Shaheen with their words, used the physical leverage of male power. Shaheen kicked, slapped and pushed the shopkeepers in an attempt to extricate herself. But the three shopkeepers and the milkman's young son, Shiraz, did not relent to a girl who had grown before their eyes. 'You were this small,' shouted the milkman. 'Since then, I know you.'

At that moment, several stray dogs clambered the fencing walls of the neighbourhood and started yelping in unison. Suddenly, the atmosphere became ominous and dreadful. The four males were taken aback.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Momentarily, they let go of Shaheen, and she, without wasting any moment to hurt her captors, kicked the milkman's son on his nose with the pointed heels of her shoes. '*Zinhekiya*...' she shouted at him. 'You want to rub my thighs?'

The milkman, shaken by the volume of blood that spurted from the broken nose of his son, made the duel personal. Shouting '*Bismillah*', he spat on his left hand and rubbed it on both hands. Using all his might in the name of Almighty, he grabbed her shoes and dragged her back in the direction of Mir Manzil.

The dogs did not stop yelping, but it was unclear whether they were howling out of happiness or in protest. Nonetheless, Shaheen extricated her feet from her shoes in full public view at the crossroads. She was about to gather herself up when they took hold of her bare feet and, without caring for the howling dogs, dragged her towards Mir Manzil.

Amid the scandalising looks of the neighbouring women and ceaseless dog howls, Shaheen was dragged by the shopkeepers over the cement-tiled gullies, potholes, surface drains and trash heaps, scattering the books, notebooks and fountain pens from her torn pink bag. Shiraz, holding his bleeding nose with his left hand, ran after Shaheen and kicked her whenever chance permitted and called her 'Bitch...Bitch...Bitch'.

When they eventually dropped Shaheen in the cobbled courtyard of Mir Manzil, shouting curses and abuses at her, she was quiet in her muddied uniform that had been reduced to rags. Around her neck was the tattered pink ring of her bag. Her intensely black hair

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

had come loose and dangled all over her face. Saliva dripped from her mouth, and her nostrils quivered in anger. Her dusty hands and elbows bled through the nicks and abrasions caused by rubbing against the rough streets. Her back was sore, and her buttocks hurt.

Raja Begum, calm and confident, had taken her customary position in her legless wicker chair on the porch. Holding her skewed staff, she praised the efforts of the entire neighbourhood. 'This is why Kashmir is called 'Paradise on Earth',' she declared.

Shaheen, panting like a panther, looked hard at her with her bright-grey eyes but said nothing. She also restrained her urge to spit at Dr Firdousa, who was holding her arm and pulling her towards the porch. They disappeared behind the front door as Raja Begum shook her head in the concealed acknowledgement of her triumph.

Moments before Shaheen came running out of the street door of Mir Manzil, Bublee Pandita, in her grey-and-white uniform near the crossroads, had come out of the Pandita Lodge, accompanied by her mother, Dr Jyoti Dhar Pandita. They stopped an already overfilled Tata minibus and got into it. Dr Jyoti Dhar Pandita alighted at Kashmir Medical College and Hospital, and Bublee Pandita went to Lal Chowk to Girls' College.

So, when Bublee came out of the college gate at three o'clock with an unknown girl, Rizwan failed to connect the replacement of the bright-grey-eyed girl with the one who looked unlike her and walked like a girl. For a moment, he was dazed by a sudden flash of an eluding memory that made him reminiscent of the

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Indoor Stadium occupation. But he couldn't clear his past immediately and decided to concentrate on the present.

He had seen the two girls near the Information Building, where he was waiting in the guise of a shopper looking at the footpath vendors selling cheap leather items. He went back to the college gate to ensure that he did not miss the bright-grey-eyed girl.

It was five days since he had seen her, and his desperation had become physical. He could not stand still. His limbs, like his heart, were fidgety. He ran to the gate and waited outside with the urgency of a hungry bear. He stood on his restless and nervy feet near the Bike-Market. Three bearded policemen guarding the college gate looked at him with professional stares, but Rizwan did not change his demeanour or show any signs of retreat. He was there with a definite purpose.

When almost all the girls came out, two policemen lunged at the gate and pushed the two heavy leaves forward for closure. Rizwan was disheartened. He could not decide if he should stay and watch the trickle of girls who came out one by one through the narrow side door, or run to find the uniformed girls at the head of the crowd near Amira Kadal bridge.

'Maybe she left earlier,' he dreaded. Still struggling with his dilemma, he was alarmed by a simple thought that she might have left via M.A. Road. Without waiting another moment, he walked briskly over the M.A. Road towards the Budshah bridge.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

There, looking for the bright-grey-eyed girl like a hunter, he found all those who resembled her but not her. All the way, while he was trying to single out the bright-grey-eyed girl from all the look-alike uniform-clad girls, he was disturbed by the idea of having seen her blond friend with another girl. *What could be the reason? Had she reacted to his comment that he had said near the date vendors? Did she remember him all these days? Or, had her blond friend parted with her on that account?* He couldn't decide. The more he thought about it, the more obscure it became.

How could he go home now? How could he leave Lal Chowk without having seen her? How could there be a Wednesday without her? How could he exist without her? Exhausted and utterly inconsolable, Rizwan came back to Pratap Park, sat near the concrete pool of seven sad fountains and looked at the dogs sleeping in the shape of closed dog-circles.

*

That evening, after they had eaten their dinner and Gopa was about to hand over the hot water bottle to Raja Begum, Shaheen snatched it from him. She unscrewed the stiff, white plastic cap and, without mercy, poured the boiling liquid over Raja Begum, sitting in her wicker chair. *'Zinhich Bued... Zinhich Bued... Zinhich Bued...'* she shouted like a child, clapping her hands and jumping in the air at the same time. She stayed there to see the old woman writhe in pain.

The hot liquid fell over Raja Begum's scarce white hair and ran down her visible patches of scalp, neck,

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

throat and chest, inciting an assorted trail of blisters. She was alarmed, got up and called, 'Yekka, look what your daughter has done to me!' She peeled off her wet, steaming *Pherran* and hoped for Iqbal to come to her rescue. But when she saw Dr Firdousa enter the living room, she raised the pitch of her voice. 'This is the fruit of your womb,' Raja Begum shouted in intense discomfort. 'Docterni, heard what she said? Your Rani?' She continued. Dr Firdousa heard her without responding. 'This is why you brought her here, to burn me alive. And humiliate me.'

Dr Firdousa did not speak a word. Relying on her experience of decades, she went to the corner near the window and picked up the silver-coloured telephone receiver. While she was dialling the number of Chinar Ghar, she stopped midway. *"The best I could do is to keep her locked in here," she thought.* She put down the receiver, went to the medicine cupboard, took out Burnol and other burn-easing ointments, and asked Raja Begum if she could apply them on her burns. Raja Begum conceded like a docile child.

Seeing that Shaheen had entered her room, Dr Firdousa asked Gopa to lock the door with a padlock and hand over the keys to her. 'What if she comes out through the *Wurusi*,' warned Raja Begum. 'She will frighten Rukhsana, my piece-of-liver.'

Dr Firdousa did not stop Gopa on his way to lock Shaheen's room. She was reassured by an unknown feeling that she was playing safe. Moments later, when Gopa came down to hand over the keys to her, she was reminded that the *Wurusi* could only be removed from

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Rukhsana's side. She also remembered she had thought about it years before, at the time of placing Shaheen in that room. She did not explain this to Raja Begum but smiled in her thoughts.

It was true. Shaheen and Rukhsana, like two banks of a river, lived in the same room and yet were separated by a light, removable, wooden partition that they called *Wurusi*. Shaheen always thought that it was a French word. But Rukhsana knew its origins; it was archaic Kashmiri.

Dr Firdousa gave up her cherished morning round, fearing the neighbours might ask her about Shaheen's conduct in the market. The nuptials with the America-settled family were still in the initial stages, and a bad word at this time could be catastrophic. Once again, she was influenced by the idea to send Shaheen to Chinar Ghar, and once again, she was deterred by the knowledge that Shaheen loathed Neelam Khanum and might cause a scandal there.

It was but natural. Shaheen, the Rani of Chinar Ghar, did not like anyone who could command at her place of birth. Since Fareed Lala had been submissive to all the Mamoos and Boba, Shaheen respected her. Neelam Khanum was different in many ways. She was authoritative, self-reliant, sharp, and ready with words. She, like Shaheen herself, was spontaneous and could handle anything and anybody in any situation. And above all, what frightened her adversaries was her invulnerability.

Shaheen did not loath her authoritative figure, or her unsteady, croaky voice, but the inconvenience she

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

caused with her all-time black veil. It was impossible for Shaheen, a street-smart girl, to know Neelam Khanum's state of mind while debating with or confronting her. 'It is easy to fight the enemy that you can read,' she once confided in her friend, Bublee. 'But it is irrational to fight someone undetectable.'

Because of these reasons, Shaheen did not visit the Chinar Ghar ever since she saw the veiled bride. It was her plan that Fareed Lala executed and got herself a separate entrance. In fact, Shaheen had done it on two accounts. First, she wanted Fareed Lala not to face humiliation at the hands of the ferocious Neelam Khanum; second, she wanted to keep another door open for herself so she could visit Boba without running into Neelam Khanum.

But since the day the additional door was cut in the Chinar Ghar, she never visited the place for reasons that she could not fathom. Sometimes, she thought that the placement of the earth-bag bunker near the grave-shrine was deterring her. She could not be sure and eventually gave in to the popular notion that it was natural for grown-up girls to stop visiting the place of their maternal grandparents.

Despite her attempts to keep the secret limited to Mir Manzil, Dr Firdousa informed the people at Chinar Ghar, chiefly for the sake of Boba, that Shaheen had been locked for good.

A storm began to grow in the hearts of the three Mamoos.

Until then, Badda Mamoo had not realised that despite his two marriages and a playful son, his soul

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

was attached to Shaheen Rani. He could not contain the overflowing rage in his heart and spilled out his agony in front of Neelam Khanum. 'What can you people do?' She replied wryly. 'You are always so helpless.'

It was true. Although she was not married to Badda Mamoo then, the legend was public. When the first gunmen fired on the soldiers at the grave-shrine bunker, they fled the post and came back in the darkness of that night, caught the inhabitants unawares, tore down the wooden doors, muddied the furnishing with their jackboots, ransacked the homes, beat the inmates and turned the whole Ratta Latta mohalla upside down.

The next day, after they had recovered from the shock of the first night-raid, men marched in the streets protesting and asking the soldiers to vacate their area. When the gathering reached Gaw Kadal bridge, the soldiers, terrified by the size of the mob, fired at them in panic. Badda Mamoo and Chota Mamoo, who were at the front and the back of the crowd, managed to escape with minor injuries that resulted mainly due to the stampede, but Manjla Mamoo was stuck in the middle of the protest march and could not extricate himself in time.

Five hundred men were shot down in a matter of eleven minutes. The dead lay in small heaps on and around the bridge. Some jumped over the bridge railing in the dry river below to escape the shooting, only to crash on the hard river bed. In the neighbourhood, people shut their doors and windows in the hope that the bullets won't come through the wooden barriers.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Those who did not have time to shut the doors and windows left their houses and ran to safer places.

Later, when the smoke of the firing had disappeared in the air, and the birds returned to their perching spots; the dead were hurled into the back of the police vehicles and taken to the Police Control Room. There, the dead were identified by their family and taken for the last rites. Manjla Mamoo was among them.

When Chota Mamoo and Badda Mamoo went to the Police Control Room to retrieve the dead body of Manjla Mamoo, he was not there. Chota Mamoo had a scuffle with the police officer in charge at that time for hiding his brother's body. Badda Mamoo intervened because he was exhausted by the grief of having lost his bachelor brother.

'Let's go,' he said, overcome by a flooding wave of helplessness. 'Let's search him there where they allow us to search for him.'

They searched for him wherever people suggested that they look for their brother. They found him nowhere because he had passed them on his way home, and neither he nor they were in a position to see clearly.

When Manjla Mamoo eventually returned home unscathed, he declared that although he had participated in all the famous protest marches, he had never had the chance to face the bullets in such proximity. He admitted that when the guns had started coughing, and people started to fall around him, he was petrified and became unconscious and thus became part of the corpse heaps. Police hurled his body into the

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

back of the van like all other corpses. When he dropped with a heavy thud on the bloodied and slippery bodies, he was woken up. He saw people in police uniforms handling the dead. When he heard them speak in Kashmiri, he cried: 'I'm alive. I'm alive.'

'You are not,' said one of the policemen, who had hurled him a while early. 'If you shout again, you certainly are not.'

Manjla Mamoo stayed quiet among the warm dead bodies but brought his legs close to each other at the knees in a spasm of self-preservation. He remained dead in the foetal position till they had reached inside the Control Room yard, where he was washed with a fire hose and nearly died of cold. From there, he went straight to Chinar Ghar, where Boba was waiting for his dead body.

It was not the first time for Boba to await the corpses of her sons. The three brothers became famous on 4 April 1979 for having set ablaze the fat effigy of General Zia, stuffed with grass and used clothes, for hanging Bhutto. They scrawled with charcoal on the walls of Srinagar; 'Death to Zia, the murderer.'

Twenty-three people died during that day. The news that reached Chinar Ghar was that three brothers had died of a single bullet, and Boba was waiting for their bodies when they appeared like triumphant soldiers.

A decade later, the three brothers went out unmasked, armed with metal rods and hockey sticks and forced the markets to shut down to show respect and solidarity with the untimely death of General Zia in

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

a plane crash. They scrawled with charcoal on the walls of Srinagar; '*Mard-e-momin, Mard-e-haq...Zia-ul-haq.*' Their confusion, however, was drowned out by the forgetfulness of time and playfulness of Tanvir.

Now, Neelam Khanum's words aroused the same helplessness in Badda Mamoo that he had suffered in the Police Control Room a year earlier, searching for the body of his dead brother. This time, he was unable to stomach the humiliation and helplessness that was constantly brewing inside him. He wandered in the courtyard since early noon. From one corner of the tall vegetation, he walked to another corner and then walked under the apple trees, and then he chose to switch the corners so that tedium would not discourage him. Later, at the porch, he took off his shoes, got inside the Chinar Ghar, and without realising, opened a door on the right-hand side of the vast corridor, roamed in the uncountable rooms with interconnected doors and open *Wurusis* for hours together.

Unable to trace his movement in the labyrinth of his seething anger, he got out from Fareed Lala's side of the house, faced his first wife and estranged son who were blowing at the red-hot charcoal of their *Kangris*, did not see them in the haze of his growing frustration, walked over the new, rudimentary porch, put on the half-fitting shoes of Fareed Lala, walked in the courtyard straight in the direction of the street door which led to the narrow street, got out in the street and was asked to stop by a lone soldier near the grave-shrine bunker.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Badda Mamoo did not stop, and the soldier held him by the shoulder of his woollen *Pherran*.

'*Behanchoud. Ruk!*' The soldier yelled at him.

Badda Mamoo turned around in absolute grip of his blinding anger and, without speaking a word, slapped the soldier with all his might. He fell on the spot. The sound of the metallic helmet hitting the cement tiles of the street resonated with the echo of the epic slap. Soldiers, prompted by the act of retaliation, got out from the earth-bag bunker, stood behind the concertina wire, cocked their guns, and without thinking for a split second, aimed at Badda Mamoo.

In the twilight of that Thursday evening, Badda Mamoo stood firm in his step and looked hard at the three soldiers aiming their guns at him as if they did not exist. His anger did not allow him to think.

At that moment, following the footsteps of her estranged husband, Fareed Lala, without her shoes and headscarf, came running towards the earth-bag bunker. She found herself standing between three horizontal gun barrels and unwavering Badda Mamoo. She felt the cold of the narrow barrels and smelled the odour of metal. Two seconds later, three bullets were fired. Two hit Fareed Lala in her chest and one in the forehead. She died barefoot and bare-headed, quietly, in the arms of her helpless but unharmed husband.

*

On Thursday, Rizwan left home in a minibus amid clear sunshine. There, on the steamed-up windowpanes, people had drawn doodles and names. Rizwan readily understood that these were the names of their love.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

With a guilty heart, he rubbed the pane clean and blew his warm breath over it. He noticed that the valley was engulfed by sudden and swiftly moving clouds. With his fingertip, he began to draw the name that he did not know. The mere thought of it stabbed at his heart like a savage. He closed his eyes to arrest the surge of his rising desperation. He calmed himself down easily, knowing that today he would see her again. When he wondered what her name could be, it rained.

March rains always brought the chills that evoked memories of the bygone winter. Gusts of cold winds from the Gulmarg Mountains made the Srinagar air shiver. Rizwan hugged himself as he alighted in the swaying chill of the three o'clock rain. He had taken off the jacket just the moment he left his home, thinking that it would warm up as the day progressed. He had put on a chequered burgundy shirt and an old grey sweater that had thinned out at the elbows.

The girls had just started to come out from the split gate. He looked ahead towards the Ghanta Ghar to make sure that he did not miss any uniformed girl. Then he swiftly crossed the slippery ground of Pratap Park, hugging himself as he crossed the park and came out on M.A. Road to make sure that she had not left from that side either. Then he came towards the Bike-Market and began to sort out, like a hunter, the uniformed girls who left the split gate and the narrow side door.

Late in the afternoon, which marked the hour when the day began to resign its short burst of splendour, almost imperceptibly, announcing approaching evening

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

- a common tedium, Rizwan was warned by a heavyset *Charsi* named Amjad, taking long drags on his loaded cigarette inside the Pratap Park: 'Love is not the business of hearts,' he said in his *charsi* way. 'It is the ritual of devastation.' Rizwan did not rebuke him. He only laughed in his heart at his stupidity.

*

Raja Begum had to defer the ring-ceremony of Rukhsana with engineer Shafat Durrani of America-settled family because the Mirs had still not returned from the mourning at Chinar Ghar. The Middleman had insisted on tying the knot to retain the propitious relationship. 'Tell them to wait a little,' said Raja Begum. 'India has riddled the bosom of my piece-of-liver.'

Neelam Khanum took over the funeral and mourning preparations. A beeline of black-*burqa*-clad women and girls sent by her brother from Kupwara swarmed the Chinar Ghar. Like diligent ants, they took hold of everything that came in their way. They imposed strict laws under which Boba could not cry openly over the loss of Fareed Lala. Chest beating was expressly forbidden. Tearing shirts in public was a punishable offence. They asked for additional canvas side panels to be placed around the tent-house to minimise the escape of female voices.

One of the black-*burqa*-clad women declared Fareed Lala as the first martyr of Chinar Ghar. 'It's a pity,' she said in the large tent-house, which had white swans, lotuses and house-boats painted on its green canvas side panels, '...that women have been forced to

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

take charge of the field that was always dominated by warm-blooded men.' She did not realise that her words were relayed over the megaphone and would cause a furore in Badda Mamoo's devastated heart.

At that moment, he was attending to the commiserations offered by the gathering of men, sitting in the numerous rooms of Chinar Ghar. They came one by one, shook his hand, prayed for his patience in times of misfortune, and asked to be accompanied by someone who knew the way around.

But Badda Mamoo, already smouldering at the death of his faithful wife, did not heed the men's prayers but took to heart the words of the female voice on the megaphone. He waited for three days to pass so as not to disrespect the obligatory mourning of his deceased wife.

At dawn on the fourth day, he got up early, took a warm shower, put charcoal in his *Kangri*, and came back to his bedroom to awaken Neelam Khanum. He looked at his unveiled wife in bed. She looked serene and unpretentious, and her beauty was accentuated by a long, curved scar on her left cheek that a snow leopard had cut when she was eleven years old. *"She was always brave," he thought.* For a moment, he envied the strength of her spirit that had overpowered a leopard in the wild.

His intense connection awakened her, and for a moment, they talked with their eyes as was the habit of Neelam Khanum. Then, when he was sure that the whole situation that they had been tacitly debating

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

since her reprimand on the midnight of *Eid* was clear, did he ask her, 'Where do I get them?'

'You need to be trained first,' she said quietly, knowing that he was asking for arms and ammunition. Her honey-coloured pupils sparkled like two little suns in the twilight of a new dawn. She pulled the dark green quilt back over herself.

'I don't have time,' he said to hide his lack of understanding, and with his fingers started stoking the embers in his *Kangri*.

'That's exactly why you need to be trained first,' she said with conviction and pulled the quilt over her head.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Chapter Five

Initially, they thought that Shaheen did not eat because she was mourning Fareed Lala's shocking death. Everybody understood her love for the deceased woman. But when she sent back the uneaten meals for the seventh straight day, Rukhsana, overcome by long accumulating guilt, removed the *Wurusi*, plank by one planed plank, and piled them up neatly near the window so that the stack did not obstruct the operation of the door. She did it all by herself, even without the help of ever-available Gopa. She was very good at organising things and very practical about the calculations of life.

When they had hinted at tying the knot with engineer Shafat Durrani settled in America, she did not say 'yes' immediately but waited. She weighed the advantages and hazards of living overseas with unknown people. But then she was enlightened by a simple logic that even if she were married in Kashmir, she would still have to put up with unknown people. And it was better to be among strangers in America than in the god-damned valley of Kashmir. That was why two days later, just after the Middleman had come for confirmation from the Mirs' side, she said 'yes'.

Unlike Shaheen, Rukhsana was not beautiful. She was short, pleasant, and easy-going like her mother, Dr Firdousa, who had brown eyes and narrow shoulders.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

She manoeuvred her short arms and legs with great efficiency. She was always clean and organised. She had the virtue of making an eye-catching impression on people from the first moment. She kept herself busy with her engagements and was known for not bothering herself with other people's affairs. But on Thursday, she initiated a connection with her long-ignored sister by serving the evening meal herself, to Shaheen's utter surprise and disbelief.

'You don't even like my name,' Shaheen said, swallowing a mouthful of rice. 'Why are you feeding me now?'

Rukhsana did not answer her. She saw that Shaheen sprayed the rice while talking with a full mouth. She waited for her to clear her mouth and then continued feeding the rice and chicken-tomato-curry with her right hand. Occasionally, she held the copper glass near her mouth for her to drink water from because she had realised that despite her apparent vigour, Shaheen was nearly dying of starvation.

She could barely sit in her wooden bed, which had not been set right ever since she was put there. Her cheeks had crumpled into little craters, and only her rust-coloured pimples were visible on her darkened face like country hillocks at dusk. Her intensely black hair had grown unhindered and hung about her face like the numerous branches of a weeping willow. She did not even have the strength to hold the copper glass.

After she had seen Shaheen lick the copper plate clean with her white tongue, Rukhsana told her to go to her room till she had set hers right. She led Shaheen

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

over the *Wurusi* partition sill and allowed her to sit in the middle of her spotless bed. Then she got back and cleaned the cobwebs in the corners near the *Wurusi* columns on Shaheen's side, dusted the window sills and the ceiling, arranged the bedding as neat and clean as her own, and stood in the middle of the room to look for anything else that needed her attention.

Shaheen realised that their rooms were almost similar, and the ceilings were exactly the same. Pink and red square tiles spread all over. But hers was never that clean and sparkling. Sitting in the middle of Rukhsana's bed, she could see her distorted reflection in the pink tiles above her head. The red ones barely reflected anything.

They stayed in Rukhsana's bed all night without finding anything odd about it. Overcome by an inexplicable emotion of camaraderie, Shaheen buried all her grudges and told Rukhsana, despite her disinterest, that she was happy for her relationship in America. 'I'm not,' replied Rukhsana bluntly. 'I don't know those people.'

'There is no benefit in knowing people,' Shaheen could not stop the words from escaping her lips but instantly decided not to go further in that direction. 'Which place in America?' She asked.

'Colorado.'

*

'You have the habit of lying to yourself,' Nishat Bibi told him. 'Now you are corrupting me as well.'

'Believe me,' Mansoor replied with a deadpan face. 'It is one of the many, simple ways to re-establish

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

anxiety.' When Nishat Bibi was about to ask him what the other ways were, Rizwan passed by them like a ghost. Without looking at anything and without bumping into anything, he took off his black Bata shoes without loosening their laces, clambered the two concrete steps of the porch, opened the squeaking door and entered the dark corridor. He passed the kitchen and bedroom doors and, with easy steps, clambered the mud staircase. Making as little noise as possible, he opened and closed the stiff door of his room and, without any break, continued to contemplate the name: *Shaheen.*

It was intolerable and yet the most exciting one. He had thought about it all along the journey of his excruciating love, and yet it was the only name that had eluded him. 'Shaheen', he said to the cold, midnight air and then, smiling to himself, repeated twice: 'Shaheen... Shaheen!'

Earlier that day, after exhausting himself by running like a mad man, in turns, over the bustling Residency Road and silent M.A. Road, he had approached the girl whose blond hair was shaped in a boy's haircut. He asked her with a heavy heart about the girl who used to accompany her before the *Eid.*

'What *Eid*?' She asked, genuinely surprised.

'The recent *Eid* before Sunday,' he said.

'Oh. The *Eid* after fasting,' she said, now looking leisurely at him.

Rizwan nodded yes and went back to his initial question. 'Where is she?'

'What business do you have with her,' she scorned

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

him with a smirk.

Rizwan, unable to detect the concealed grin in her smirk, pleaded with her to tell him where she was.

'Who?' She asked without concealing her grin.

'Ishrat...' replied a confident-looking Rizwan.

'Ishrat? Which Ishrat?'

'Your tall friend,' he said. 'Grey eyes.'

'Ishrat? No. Her name is Shaheen,' she confirmed and added that she had no knowledge of her whereabouts. They exchanged names, and Bublee told him she remembered him approaching Shaheen near the date carts.

Rizwan was left in the whirlpool of his unexpected ecstasy. Now that he had known her name, he wanted her all the more. With a name, she seemed dearer, sweeter and familiar. He sighed and watched Bublee mingle in the crowd. She turned right, crossed the road, bent in front of a cart selling newspapers and film magazines, picked up a copy of 'Times of India' newspaper and handed one rupee and fifty paise to the vendor. Rizwan wondered if there could be any news in the entirety of God's world as invaluable and as exciting as he was holding in his jubilant heart.

That night, he could not sleep. Turning in his ruffled bed he kept on repeating the word 'Shaheen'. He wanted to declare to the whole world the name of his love. Shaheen. The cold breeze of Shaheen coming from the window. The blue pillow of Shaheen. The midnight air of Shaheen. The wild imagination and the calm trance of Shaheen. Looking at the brown wooden beams running parallel to the low ceiling of his mud-

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

plastered room, he broke the name into two syllables - 'Sha' and 'Heen'. Then, it occurred to him that either of the two syllables could replace his 'word' given by Samir. Then, for a long time, he debated in his mind with which one of the two syllables, 'Shaaaa' or 'Heeeen', should he initiate that night's meditation with.

When it struck two, however, he was overcome by a seducing fatigue. His eyelids bowed slowly to the overwhelming weight of the creeping sleep. Without realising, Rizwan, for the first time since his initiation, slept at the fixed hour of his meditation while his friend and mentor, Samir Pandita, was fully awake at two o'clock, not for meditation though, but in the guarded funeral of his uncle.

Raj Dhar was shot dead by masked gunmen in his bedroom at his Nishat Residence, Dhar Abode, when he was preparing to transmit the day's information. He was an Intelligence Bureau agent. His blood spattered all over his striped night suit that had two bullet holes at chest level; the third shot had gone straight to his head.

It was the third such killing in the city of Srinagar. Kashmiri Hindus were shocked. 'Now it's a crime to be an intelligence officer,' asserted a relative with a mixed feeling of regret and shock.

'It is,' replied another relative, having a tapering saffron *tilak* on his forehead. 'It certainly is,' he continued. 'Now we have to be cautious. The situation is becoming dangerous.'

His were the last words because outside, the

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

mosque loudspeakers were pronouncing the day's first *Azan*. They all got up in a hurry to cremate the deceased before it was day.

*

Allah-o-Akbar... Allah-o-Akbar. Rizwan heard the muffled call in the depths of his sleep. He was partially woken up by the Arabic verses amid his dream. He was dreaming that it was Friday, and he was coming out of the mosque when everyone else was going in. His body grazed the unceasing crowd that was going in the opposite direction. He tore his brown shirt near the armpit in an attempt to prevent himself from being carried away by the current of the inconsiderate throng.

'Why are you leaving?' A stocky little man whose beard was hennaed green asked him.

'Like a bird, God is not in, but out,' Rizwan replied with a clear mind. '...and also, his name.'

*

'*Mubarak!*' The Middleman said aloud. He asked the two accompanying servants to place the overfilled wicker baskets, wrapped in glittering silver-coloured decoration sheets, on the porch. The two servants, like a single apparition, put the baskets on the porch, walked back towards the street door in silence and disappeared behind the heavy, wooden door.

'This is from them. Just a little *Nazrana* for their daughter-in-law,' exclaimed the Middleman with pride. 'The guest will come in the afternoon.'

He stayed in the *Baithak* - the guest room - to wait for the guest. Iqbal, refreshed by the good news, gladly gave him company. They did not talk much, and soon,

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Iqbal left to smoke in his room. Raja Begum had expressly forbidden smoking in the *Baithak*.

Dr Firdousa was busy supervising the preparations. She had the saffron *Kehwa* boiling in the copper samovar early in the morning. Two *Wazas* were cooking the *Wazwan* dishes on a small hearth outside, behind the house. Gopa was busy taking the necessary paraphernalia in and out of the house from the rear door. Dr Firdousa asked him to get the bread from the bread-maker first and then make chutney out of onion and vinegar, and the second one by mixing ground walnuts and green chillies with hung curd. 'Ask *Waza* for the measurements,' she cautioned him. 'Don't do it yourself.'

Shaheen helped Rukhsana with her bridal dress, which Iqbal had asked one of his most skilled artisans to make out of *Shahtoos*. The collar-neck work was done with a very fine thread of gold, stitched into the shapes of paisley and tiny tree leaves spread out on the bosom area on a labyrinth of intricate loops of branches. Shaheen brushed the dress with a cloth brush as Rukhsana had shown her. She was surprised that such things as a cloth brush existed.

She helped Rukhsana get into the dress and wondered if she, too, would have such a dress one day. Then she asked Rukhsana to have a look at herself in the rectangular mirror of the dressing table that they had gotten a day earlier for the occasion.

Rukhsana looked into the mirror for a moment, lifted her makeup-heavy eyelids, and looked at Shaheen. They smiled in each other's eyes.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

The sisters had found mutual camaraderie, and started sharing secrets. Shaheen gave her the gift that she had bought before the *Eid*. She tore down the glittering silver paper and handed out a small brown teddy bear to Rukhsana. The bear had a pink bow around its neck with a tiny cloth rose attached at the front.

'Does it have a name?' Rukhsana asked.

'I don't know,' replied Shaheen.

'I know,' said Rukhsana. 'Let's call it Gulab.'

Shaheen agreed.

'I'm so confused,' Rukhsana confided her dread to Shaheen. 'She is a professor...and teachers are horrible; as if they had no one else to send here.'

'You don't have to live with her,' assured Shaheen. 'You'll live far away from this obnoxious place... with Engineer Shafat.' Shaheen giggled. 'What shall I call him, Shafat Sahb, Shafat Ji, Shafat Jiju or Shafat Bhaiya ... What?'

'Shut up,' said Rukhsana.

The two sisters burst into a sudden but already brewing laughter. Then they threw Gulab at each other and caught the little bear mid-air. In the past three days, they had shared much more than they had known about each other in their entire lifetime. They were friends living in the same room, enjoying, playing, sharing and caring.

In the *Baithak*, Raja Begum adjusted the setting of crewel curtains on the windows to allow for sufficient daylight and appropriate exposure. For the entire

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

morning, she had been haunted by the apparition of a misgiving. She had let the feeling pass unattended on account of the day's importance. When she was adjusting the last crewel curtains, the apparition suddenly manifested like a bright revelation. She knew all along that something was amiss and, as such, exclaimed loudly towards Boba, sitting alongside the Middleman. 'Where are all the Mamoos?'

*

'The first lesson of Guerrilla warfare,' explained the bearded Trainer, 'is to forget proper exits. Create your own paths. Let the enemy get lost in their own maps.'

Badda Mamoo did not allow the sneeze to escape his nostrils entirely. He restrained the inevitable gust of wind by contracting the inner muscles of his nose and succeeded in avoiding a scene on the first day of the training. But Manjla Mamoo and Chota Mamoo failed to do so. They sneezed with such intensity that the Trainer was lost for a moment.

'Imagine,' he said when he had recovered from his shock, '...if you three were in an ambush...' he looked at the three brothers with contempt, '...and somebody remembered you at that instant. You would all be dead.'

'These two would be dead,' corrected Badda Mamoo. 'I didn't sneeze.'

'They won't spare you because you didn't sneeze, you idiot,' the Trainer said.

That argument brought about the hidden qualities of Badda Mamoo. He lacked common sense, but it was

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

his courage to disagree that set him apart from the rest of the group. 'The way I see it,' said the Trainer to Badda Mamoo, 'you are a natural leader.'

That day, while the aunt of the would-be-groom, Professor Shazia Parveen, visited the Mir Manzil in her official white Ambassador car driven by her chauffeur in a starched white uniform with sparkling gold-coloured buttons, the three Mamoos were busy learning the basics of guerrilla warfare in the jungles of Kupwara. The Trainer, Neelam Khanum's younger brother, was as large as his sister, but unlike his sister, his pupils were blue. The training lasted for only three days because, in the course of the training, it became evident that Badda Mamoo had greater control over the overall training program, and he made sure that the program was curtailed so as to be ahead of the happenings in the city of Srinagar.

'India is not allowing the militancy to expand,' he informed the Trainer. 'We must make sure that they fail: earlier the better.'

Badda Mamoo opposed the Trainer so often, with such clarity and with such logical reasoning that he took control of the whole situation with such ease that it was impossible not to obey him. The Trainer continued to train the other two brothers but with the instructions and permission from Badda Mamoo.

Badda Mamoo had displayed the same qualities when they started their firm, Messrs Chinar Contracting Agency. After the death of their father, they tried their hand at other businesses. First, they supplied the government with the same used clothes their father sold

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

on hand carts, to clean machine parts. Then they tore down the used cloths to rags and sold them at higher rates because of their efficient use. Then, as he began to invent novel ways of increasing the price of the same thing by citing a different application, he guided the government officers about the ways contracts could be framed and awarded so that it was impossible for the contractors to suffer any financial losses and at the same time assured the officials' interests as well.

They not only grew rich but made sure that their counterparts in the government also advanced financially. The money came in such abundance that they bought a berth for Firdousa in Kashmir Medical College and Hospital.

When she graduated as Dr Firdousa, she was ready for marriage, and they married her in the illustrious Mir family. At Rukhsana's birth, they housed and fed the women of the entire Ratta Latta in the Chinar Ghar, eleven of which got lost in the labyrinthine corridors and windowless rooms only to be rescued by the thunder of the first *Azan* of the next day. The occasion was referred to as an outstanding example of wealth and prosperity by all the residents of Ratta Latta on all the occasions of happiness until Shaheen was born and gloom took over the bustling Chinar Ghar.

*

Back at the Mir Manzil, Shazia Parveen turned out to be a great conversationalist. She didn't talk about herself at all. She allowed the subject matter to evolve from the participants' prerogative. She could not only relate to the ancient lifestyle of Boba when an entire

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Kashmiri family had only one pair of shalwars at their disposal, but also accommodated the shyness of Rukhsana, sitting quietly in her natural-grey bridal dress of *Shahtoos*. She discussed the position of Kashmiri Hindus in the present scenario with Raja Begum at length, and asked Dr Firdousa for advice on keeping the teeth sparkling white at her age.

'There is no pleasure,' she said with a delighted face, '... that can match the pleasure of munching with your natural teeth.'

It was barely three o'clock when Shazia Parveen had finished all the formalities that would-be in-laws were supposed to render in the first meeting. She got up and asked for their permission to leave. They requested her to stay a little longer and gave her the obvious reason that there was enough time till the curfew hour. But she, with her demeanour of a special relative, refused to stay any longer.

'Another time,' she said in a low, decent voice.

Dr Firdousa was pleased with herself. She had averted Shaheen's presence successfully. And she promised herself that she would continue to be prudent till Rukhsana was married off and safely in America.

With a relieved heart, she looked at the long braid of dyed hair that swayed between Shazia Parveen's huge buttocks over her flowing, purple shirt. The esteemed guest was about to cross the door frame of the *Baithak* when, without any warning, she stopped in her step as if nudged by the angels of fall. 'Didn't see the bride's younger sister,' she asked.

Rukhsana nearly fainted. All others were rendered

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

silent by the untimely and potentially catastrophic question. It was Dr Firdousa, with her heart toughened by a failed love, who conceived a befitting answer. 'She is at college,' she lied.

Shazia Parveen turned around and faced the shocked faces of her hosts. 'Which college?' She asked them matter-of-factly.

'Girls' College,' said Dr Firdousa fervently with the hope that it was over for the day.

Shazia Parveen broke the wall of stupefied people in front of her, walked the entire length of the room with a broad grin on her large face and sat down leisurely again at the same place she had been sitting all along. Rukhsana and all others, shocked and speechless, were obliged to take their respective places.

'Which class?' Shazia Parveen asked.

'First year,' replied Dr Firdousa with a heavy heart. Her dread was turning into an unavoidable reality. *"Sins -of-mine!" She thought.*

'Subjects?'

There befell a gloom of silence for Dr Firdousa had no idea what Shaheen was studying at the college. She had never enquired, nor had Shaheen ever bothered to tell her. She looked at Iqbal; he was equally ignorant and indicated so with a pout of his smoke-darkened lips.

'Arts,' said the bride under her veil to the immense relief of all the hosts. 'History and Political Science.'

'Great,' said Shazia Parveen. 'I teach History in the same college. How come I've never heard of her,' she

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

continued. 'What is her name?'

'Shaheen,' replied Dr Firdousa. 'Shaheen Iqbal.'

'Mmmm. Shaheen Iqbal...' Shazia Parveen pondered for a while but failed to recollect. 'Maybe she is in the other section with Professor Qurrat-ul-ain. Tell her to meet me tomorrow.'

'How long have you been teaching there?' Raja Begum asked to relieve Dr Firdousa of the immense burden she was struggling with.

'Almost all my life,' replied Shazia Parveen with a chuckle. 'Now I'm the Principal there.'

Dr Firdousa was prompted by a sudden and irrepressible surge of energy. 'Professor Sunita Koul Dhar used to be the Principal there,' she said, feeling triumphant. 'As far as my knowledge is concerned.'

'She used to be,' replied Shazia Parveen with a sad face. 'She left the valley when they killed her husband last week. Now I'm in charge.' With those words, she began to get up again. 'I must be getting late now.'

'Please stay a while,' said Dr Firdousa. 'The real conversation has just begun.'

'Next time,' she said. 'By the way, Dr Firdousa, any chances of you becoming the Principal of Kashmir Medical College... any time soon?'

Dr Firdousa was stunned. It was not only an inappropriate question but quite embarrassing as well.

'Soon,' Raja Begum replied after seeing the colour fade away from Dr Firdousa's face. 'Very soon. Inshallah.'

When the guest had left in her white official

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Ambassador car and the heavy, wooden street door had settled in its equally heavy frame; Mirs were in deep distress. Dr Firdousa had seen off Professor Shazia Parveen with two knives stuck in her breathing liver. Shaheen was to be allowed to go to college again, and she had to do the impossible herself: to become the Principal of Kashmir Medical College and Hospital.

'Why did we have to lie to her?' She asked Raja Begum in controlled scorn.

'I didn't lie. You did,' Raja Begum replied curtly. 'You said Shaheen was at college.'

'You told her that I will become the Principal,' she replied in desperation.

'Yes, I did. So what? What are your three good-for -nothing brothers for?' Raja Begum shouted, giving vent to her long-brewing consternation. Before Dr Firdousa could tell her what her brothers had to do with it, Raja Begum continued, 'Their niece is getting engaged, and where are they? ... Enjoying picnic with their shameless, blond wives?' Dr Firdousa could not break her silence. 'Is this how Mamoos are supposed to render their responsibilities?'

After she had made an explicit show of her extreme displeasure, Raja Begum walked towards her room with large open steps, dragging her skewed staff along.

*

Neelam Khanum was enraged because Boba termed the training of her three sons as most inappropriately timed. 'They are all Mamoos,' she said to no one in particular. 'They should have thought of

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

that before going for training.'

'It is the mothers who have domesticated the men of Kashmir,' Neelam Khanum, too, said to no one in particular but with the understanding that Boba and her sons were listening. 'That is why India has enslaved us for half a century,' she shouted behind her black veil. Her loud deliberations, which lasted for more than an hour and asked for the sons to rebel against their overbearing mothers, shook the nails in the wooden ceilings of the Chinar Ghar.

The three brothers had just returned from their gruelling three-day training from Kupwara and were so exhausted that they decided not to intervene in the women's affairs.

In the morning, Neelam Khanum, knowing that she had not heard anything from the three brothers concerning her remarks against the overbearing mothers, resumed shouting from her room.

Badda Mamoo, revelling in his dreams of becoming the leader of the uprising, did not hear her. But Manjla Mamoo and Chota Mamoo had already been waiting for a pretext to answer her and shouted back immediately, in unison, 'Beware,' they said aloud to one in particular. 'Don't anyone ever dare say anything about our Boba again. We will not be responsible for its consequences.'

Neelam Khanum did not answer them back with another political allusion; instead, she woke up Badda Mamoo from his reveries. 'Your brothers need to get married...' she whispered in his left ear. '... on a war footing basis.'

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Chapter Six

Now that he knew her name, he was troubled by a different stabbing pain. He no longer had the feeling that he would bump into her at any crossroads. Now, he assumed to ask for her. *Where is Shaheen? How's Shaheen? Where has Shaheen gone? Has Shaheen come to college today?* He wanted someone to tell him about her. She could be quoted. *Shaheen is in the Lambert Lane. Shaheen has just crossed the Ghanta Ghar. Shaheen is shopping in the Goni Khan Gali.* When someone talked about her, he would know. But nothing like that happened. No one but he alone was bothered by the discovery of her name.

For two days, he saw Bublee walk with the new girl towards Ghanta Ghar. He looked at her from the footpath along the Information Building in the guise of a window shopper. But he did not run like crazy over M.A. Road to see if Shaheen was there and then not find her there either. He was satiated. He could still celebrate the novelty of having known her name: *Shaheen.*

That day, when he was in Pratap Park, looking in the mirror of the empty space before his eyes, he was overtaken by a feeling that something good was in the offing. He set out firmly, following a strong impulse, towards Ghanta Ghar. He watched an auto-rickshaw move slowly in front of him. On its back was written in

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

large letters: 'No girlfriend - No tension'. He was amused by the precision of the simple line. When he was past the Ladakhi vendors selling fur items in front of the Tyndale Biscoe School, a hand grenade exploded near the Ghanta Ghar.

He defended his face against the invisible splinters with an extended arm. But he only felt the blow of the wind shaking his entire frame. He turned around in the commotion of the blast aftermath, walked in the space between two long SRTC buses with shattered window panes, and crossed the M.A. Road. Without any apparent haste, he turned left through the Exchange Road and disappeared in the narrow by-lanes.

On the third day, he came to Lal Chowk with a purpose. He planned to ask Bublee about Shaheen's residence. Then he'd find a way to get to her. He was sure of that. But he must find her, for he could not afford to die in a possible grenade attack someday without meeting Shaheen again. He would confide his desperation in Bublee. He would plead with her to tell him her whereabouts. He would touch her feet if she refused. He would do anything and everything that the situation demanded. He would listen to no excuses today.

But on that day, he could not spot Bublee at all. He cursed himself for not remembering the new girls' faces. He couldn't spot them either. That day, utterly hopeless and yet unwilling to accept the situation, he roamed the entire Lal Chowk looking for anyone who could sort his matters out. He found none.

He got so disheartened that for a moment, it

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

occurred to him to forget it all and get rid of his excruciating quest, the 'tension'. There was no alternative, however. He was locked for life, and he knew it. He would have to live with Shaheen or die in her pursuit.

Inside Pratap Park, he saw the bunch of *Charsis* sitting in a circle under the long arms of the octopus Chinar, taking long drags, in turns, from a single wet cigarette and exhaling blue smoke through their wet, dirty nostrils. For a moment, he stared at them till one of them, overcome by pity, extended his arm and offered Rizwan the smouldering cigarette. Rizwan refused with a wave of his two hands.

'It is the only recourse where all else fails,' said the *Charsi* with braided long hair. 'It's our recourse. It's your recourse.'

Rizwan took the cigarette gingerly in his hand and was about to take the first drag when the *Charsi* asked him to sit down. 'It's loaded,' he warned him. 'You may not be able to handle it standing.'

To the utter disbelief of the *Charsis*, not only could Rizwan handle the first drag standing, but he took three drags one after the other to create space for the immeasurable relief that was entering him. He handed the cigarette back to the *Charsi* who had spoken to him, and said, '*Shukriya.*'

The *Charsi* observed his deep sadness and looked into his eyes. 'There are no challenges in love,' he said in a slow, measured tone. 'Love is the only challenge.'

Later, feeling light-headed, Rizwan walked out of the park and headed towards Ghanta Ghar. He did not

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

stop there and followed his heart and walked ahead until he was at the centre of Amira Kadal bridge. His head was clear now, and he stopped in his step to warn himself aloud, 'Never ever tell me to forget her. Never!'

At that moment, without having any premonition, he spotted Samir Pandita donning autumn-brown *Pherran*, walking like an apparition. 'Perhaps he is in a trance,' fancied Rizwan. He was feeling light and spilling over. But he couldn't afford to let him pass without meeting him and sharing the details of their common pursuit.

Samir, on seeing Rizwan, allowed the gloom of his face to settle into a familiar look. 'Things aren't as good as they look, Rizwan,' he said.

Rizwan, knowing that Samir could understand the hidden and the indescribable, replied, 'Yes. Only our hearts know the truth.'

'But you can't help it, Rizwan.'

'I wish I could,' Rizwan continued to answer in general with a smile fixed on his face.

'Certain things are beyond our grasp and control,' said Samir with a heavy heart.

Rizwan was lost in his pursuits when Samir startled him. 'I'm worried for myself and my family,' he confided in Rizwan. 'But listen to me,' he continued. 'Violence is only a beguiling illusion - don't let it deceive you.'

Suddenly, the effects of the loaded cigarette began to seduce his senses. Rizwan had the feeling that it was

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

night, and he was frightened by the yelping of the stray dogs. His entire body shook in terror. But he was in the warmth of dusk, standing in the middle of Amira Kadal bridge amid a crowd of people, facing the rusty tomb of Ragu Nath Mandir, and watching Samir Pandita disappear in the crimson of the setting sun.

That night, after they had eaten their dinner, Rizwan asked his father about the state of affairs in the valley. Since he had spotted Shaheen, he had remained absolutely ignorant of the happenings in the valley.

'Lately, in the interior city,' said Mansoor, 'three brothers started a militant organisation of their own. The eldest is their leader and the two younger ones are his army. Where are we heading?'

It was partially true. For an entire day, Boba did not allow them to include Tanvir in their party. 'He can't beat me in the game of hide and seek,' she cautioned Badda Mamoo. 'And you want him to take on the Indian might.'

'He'll not be exactly a warrior,' explained Badda Mamoo. 'He'll lead a team to enforce morality and decency in the strayed society.' Boba conceded, as always, for the sake of people's good.

Earlier that day, after they had asked Neelam Khanum to behave with their mother, the three newly trained militants were taken to the headquarters in Noor Bagh swamps by Blond Boy. There, they were explained and assigned their roles and duties.

'You'll have to go with three separate groups to ensure you have no idea where the other two are,' explained the Area Commander. 'That's the first

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

principle of guerrilla warfare.'

At that moment, a delegation of various parties arrived, and the three brothers looked at the Area Commander for orders. The Area Commander indicated them to stay. He talked to the delegation about the state of uprising which they alluded to the global Islamic uprising.

'We are not talking about the freedom of Kashmir here,' the Chief of the delegation said squarely, 'but the synthesis of an entire Islamic block from Kashmir to Marakash.'

'In that case,' replied the mystified Area Commander, 'tell them to start from Marakash.'

The delegation left without reaching any agreement with the Area Commander. But the Area Commander had not lost the thread of his conversation with the three brothers and resumed his speech about the tactics of guerrilla warfare. When he was done, he indicated his three assistants to take the three brothers with them.

The three assistants, whose names were not revealed, took the three brothers' arms and led them to three different doors of the headquarters.

When Manjla Mamoo and Chota Mamoo were about to enter the doorframe, without moving an inch from his place, Badda Mamoo shouted: 'Stop.' He was convinced by the idea that his services could best be used as a leader and not as an ordinary soldier. So, he explained his position to the Area Commander and even digressed to tell him his training story.

'When you are out there,' said the Area

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Commander, 'you'll find your place as per your ability. That is how it works on the ground.'

'I'm out there,' replied a firm-looking Badda Mamoo. 'And I've already found my place. I'm a natural leader. I can't be led by somebody's assistants.'

The Area Commander looked hard at Badda Mamoo, affectionately pinched his bearded cheek and asked him an elementary sort of question. 'What is your name, *Jigar*?'

'Badda Mamoo,' replied Badda Mamoo.

The Area Commander burst into genuine laughter and, changing his demeanour to extreme annoyance in a span of a single moment; he looked towards Blond-Boy, who had brought them to the headquarters and opened his arms wide like a question. 'Get rid of them,' he commanded.

The three brothers were about to walk back through the single door they had entered when the Area Commander lashed at his assistants. 'You idiots. Take their weapons.'

Badda Mamoo and Manjla Mamoo stopped in their steps, but Chota Mamoo turned around in silence, released the safety latch of his automatic AK-47 rifle and sprayed a shower of bullets in the direction of the ceiling. 'I still have two dozen bullets left in it,' he said, pointing towards his gun.

There befell an intense silence, dust and debris. The Area Commander, shocked at the reaction of the three-day trained militants, indicated with his extended arm to let the three brothers go unharmed.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

*

'The first thing we all need,' said Badda Mamoo, 'is proper names.' They were back at the Chinar Ghar and had already envisaged their plans to launch their own party to fight against the Indian rule in the valley of Kashmir. In reverence of their home, they named their party Al-Chinar Mujahideen.

Boba was ecstatic but warmed them at the same time, 'Be careful,' she said. 'Don't spoil the name of your home. Your deeds will be talked about in Umrika.'

Neelam Khanum, after consulting her mentors in Kupwara, did not oppose the move. 'They appreciate it,' she said to the three brothers in the maiden meeting of Al-Chinar Mujahideen. 'They will support you in any case as long as you fight the same enemy. But you'd have to listen to them as and when they send their word ... through me.'

As a token of their support, they had sent two bagsful of Indian currency notes and one bagful of arms and ammunition. Along with the three bags were three names that the three brothers were supposed to assume to avoid being trapped by the intelligence network. All three of them wanted to take the name 'Sikandar'. The other two were 'Kaka' and 'Hassan'.

They called out for Boba to decide on the names. She was playing hide and seek with little Tanvir in the labyrinth of the right-hand-side rooms. The duo came to the meeting room, panting. 'Let the draw decide what is hard to decide,' said Boba.

Tanvir wrote three names on three quarters of a

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

page of his notebook and tore off the three quarters. Boba mixed the three chits. Tanvir lifted the first chit from Boba's cupped hands and was about to hand it to Chota Mamoo, sitting next to him, when Neelam Khanum reprimanded him. 'The eldest first,' she commanded.

Tanvir gave the first chit to Badda Mamoo. It was 'Kaka'. The second one turned out to be 'Hassan' for Manjla Mamoo, and the cherished name of 'Sikandar' was to be assumed by Chota Mamoo.

'This doesn't feel right,' said Neelam Khanum without assigning any reason. 'After all, Badda Mamoo is the eldest of this house.'

'So?' Chota Mamoo asked.

'So,' replied Neelam Khanum, 'he deserves to be called Sikandar, not Kaka.'

Chota Mamoo's blood rose to his eyes, but Boba intervened, as always, to keep peace in Chinar Ghar. 'You were always Kaka for me,' she said to Chota Mamoo and asked him to exchange chits with Badda Mamoo.

The chits were exchanged, and the names were set. But Tanvir's face revealed a different story. 'What about me?' He asked with his orphan eyes.

'You'll stay home and assist them,' said Neelam Khanum.

It was then that Badda Mamoo spoke with the authority of General Sikandar for the first time. 'Tanvir was not born to assist. But to lead. Earlier the better.' Badda Mamoo's words thundered, and there befell a

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

long silence after the reverberations of his last words had died in the damp mud-walls.

Tanvir perspired from shyness. Then he spoke for himself: 'Tanvir Tiger.'

*

Although she was prepared to send Shaheen to college again, Dr Firdousa could not live with the immense risk it involved. 'She is so unpredictable,' she said in defence of her apprehensions.

Actually, in the back of her mind, she wanted something of Shaheen's as security to guarantee her proper behaviour. But as she raked her imagination, Shaheen owned nothing. She wore the used dresses and shoes of Rukhsana till she was larger than her, took her old bags to college, played with her broken toys in her early days, slept on the used mattresses, and had the used curtains drawn on her windows. Even the tricycle, the only thing she really loved in her childhood, had the name of Rukhsana brush painted in red on its silver-coloured handle. *How could she be tamed?*

Raja Begum did not intervene, nor did she encourage Iqbal to sort it out. They smoked *Hooka* in the living room in turns in absolute silence. Rukhsana, sitting near the telephone apparatus watched them, also in absolute silence. Dr Firdousa came in to get her plastic lunch box and was about to pick it up from the shelf when she saw Shaheen, who had gone into the courtyard washroom, walking back in absolute silence. She heard her walk quietly over the porch and enter the corridor.

'Look at her looks,' Dr Firdousa said to no one in

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

particular. 'She looks like a sweeper's child.'

'If it's her looks,' replied Raja Begum to the immense relief of Rukhsana, 'then it's not a problem.'

*

The washerwoman came at six in the evening with her stuff. Her husband, who carried the metallic steamer, left the equipment on the porch and walked back without talking to anybody. When he had disappeared behind the street door, Raja Begum asked Gopa to get the steamer in the bare living room. Earlier, he had moved the living room furnishing and furniture to the *Baithak*.

'Where's the tub?' The washerwoman asked.

Gopa brought her the oval-shaped aluminium tub with two handles. Rukhsana handed out her perfumed soaps and striped towels. They brought her the kerosene stove on which she put the steamer and added water.

'What to wash?' The confused washerwoman asked. She heard silence. They waited for Dr Firdousa to give the final shape to the procedure.

They washed Shaheen when it was all dark. All the windows and doors were shut. The telephone line was disconnected, and Iqbal was asked to stay close to the locked street door to stop anyone from coming in.

The aluminium tub had to be replaced with the largest one they had because there was no working space in the small tub when Shaheen was made to sit into it.

Shaheen was dismissive of the whole act in the first

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

place. Her wild screams at the mere thought of being washed by a stranger, were calmed down by Rukhsana. First, she used the charm of a confidante, then a sister, but Shaheen refused to sit in the large aluminium tub at all. 'I'd rather jump naked in the Jhelum than be washed by a stranger in a round tub.'

'Not even for your sister?' Rukhsana asked.

'Why for a sister?' Shaheen snapped back.

'Not even for a bride who is not wedded yet?'

Shaheen passed her hard stare from Rukhsana to Dr Firdousa and settled her devilish eyes on Raja Begum. 'I know how helpless a daughter-in-law can be.'

All the women of the family sat in the kitchen, and the washerwoman alone did all the washing, first with the steamer and then with lukewarm water.

'You remember what business you had with us tonight?' Raja Begum reminded the washerwoman.

'Yes, Begum,' replied the washerwoman while taking out the dirt with her fingers from the filthy nostrils of Shaheen. 'The Persian rugs in the living room were too large to be taken out for washing.'

'Good,' said Raja Begum.

After taking the dirt out of her nostrils, the washerwoman let the steam soften the rust-coloured pimples. Meanwhile, she rubbed her neck with a thick lather. When she was done with the dirt rings around her neck, she checked the state of her pimples. Then she scrubbed the pimples with the thick coconut grass and waited till all the pores had spilt out the dirty blood.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Dr Firdousa indicated to the washerwoman to cleanse the brown teeth of Shaheen. She rubbed strips of dry towel over her grimy teeth. The plaque came off with the towel, along with the blood of the weak gums.

Once Shaheen had vented her anger over the bleeding gums, the washerwoman rubbed the inside of the dried bark of the walnut tree on the slippery teeth until a definite rubbing sound could be heard.

Dr Firdousa was happy with the results and praised the washerwoman. The washerwoman, in turn, cursed her job. 'I wash inanimate carpets, not devils.'

Rukhsana stopped Shaheen from hitting the washerwoman by indicating to her that she was naked and should not consider running after her.

Nevertheless, on that evening, no one outside the mud-wall of Mir Manzil looked into the reality of the flooding wastewater that ran in the surface drains of the interior city - the steaming black water of dirt, the unclean blood, the goo and grime of decades. Nor did anyone press the washerwoman in the morning to tell the truth of her evening escapade from the workshop. Everyone was occupied in their little businesses. More so was Rizwan.

Although he had decided never to forget her, he had also decided to go on living without her. So, when Shaheen left the college gate at three the next day, Rizwan, pretending to be a window shopper, looked at the girls without any hope of finding Shaheen. But all these days, he had come to this conclusion that they all looked the same in the uniform, and to prevent that reality from deceiving him, he had acquired the habit of

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

looking at the height of the girls to establish the presence of Shaheen. That he had found the most practical and the most convenient a procedure.

He was looking at the girls' height with lazy interest when, suddenly, he was transfixed. 'Is it Shaheen?' He asked a passer-by without realising what he was doing.

The passer-by took him for a lunatic and said, 'Entire Kashmir has gone crazy!'

Despite the trite remark of the stranger, Rizwan was convinced that the girl alongside the golden queen was Bublee, with blond hair shaped in a boy's haircut. As Rizwan recovered from the shock, he could also make out the bright-grey eyes and the faded remnants of the rust-coloured pimples. He recognised the hidden vigour of her smooth chin, confirmed by the open steps with which she carried herself forward.

"Is it true that after all these days of non-stop agony," he thought, "I see her again, in real?"

He was so exhausted and traumatised by his efforts to reconcile the reality with his memory that he decided against following her. He saw her move away from him and disappear in the three o'clock crowd. With slow, involuntary steps, he walked to the Pratap Park and asked the *Charsis* to give him a drag.

'Sit down,' they said in unison.

'Do you believe in love at first sight?' Rizwan asked after taking a few drags.

'All other types are afterthoughts,' said Amjad, the heavyset *Charsi,* sitting away from the circle.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

*

'Write,' ordered General Sikandar, and Tanvir Tiger wrote in his notebook. 'Cinema Halls. Liquor Shops. Beauty Parlours. All banned.'

'What will those people do if we close their businesses?' Commander Hassan asked.

'They will join us, naturally!' General Sikandar said. 'This is the beauty of authority.'

In the course of that night, while rain soaked the Residency Road, M.A. Road, the soft turf of Pratap Park, and filled the concrete tank around the seven sad fountains, the three brothers discussed the modus operandi to cleanse the society of its evils, and damage the Indian establishment as much as possible.

Neelam Khanum was listening to them, word by one single word, until all of them, fatigued by the novelty of their trade, stopped talking. When there was significant silence in the room, Neelam Khanum expressed her plans to get Commander Hassan and Area Commander Kaka married.

She displayed two passport-size, black-and-white photographs of two veiled girls. The only thing that was visible was their pupils through the netting stitched over the eye-slits. It was evident from the photographs that the two girls were blond.

Commander Hassan did not look at the photographs at all. He refused to marry straight away, citing reasons that his life was now public property.

'My life has no scope of being normal anymore,' he stated his position in a clear, unequivocal and honest

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

way. 'When I sleep, I don't know if I wake up at the same place or in some Indian garrison. When I walk, I don't know from where would they come with their informers and shoot me dead. I don't know when, in an ambush, would I get killed... I don't want to leave behind a widow or an orphan.'

Commander Hassan continued his monologue as if he had just learnt to speak. He did not stop for a long time, and all the while, Area Commander Kaka was listening to him and looking intently at the two black-and-white photographs.

'In that case,' said Area Commander Kaka, when his elder brother had just finished his monologue, 'I'll marry both the blonds.'

Neelam Khanum did not agree on two accounts. First, it was not in her plans. Second, she quoted from the 'instructions' that a husband should be just with his wives. 'We shall decide about your second marriage only after we see how you have treated your first wife first,' she said with finality.

Owing to the gross disrespect of his sense of decency, Area Commander Kaka refused to marry at all. He did, however, listen to the 'instructions' without showing any of his feelings on his face. But once Neelam Khanum had said her final words, he got up in rage and hurled the two black-and-white photographs in the midnight air. 'All this is happening ...' he said loudly in his emotionally choked voice, '... is because I'm the youngest of all. That's the truth.'

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Chapter Seven

Shaheen's sparkling face was a living proof that God existed. The mere sight of her incited a feeling of adoration in people. Her presence lifted the infirm spirits from the residues of defeated passions, and caused bewilderment in the hearts of those prone to self-complacency. Despite the muteness and pessimism caused by yesterday's *charas*, Rizwan felt self-assured when he saw her again. He found her pristine, glowing and incomparable. In the crowd of uniformed girls, she stood out. At times, he was enthralled by her charm, and at times, her shy glance made him lose his bearing. As he contemplated her incessantly, he was possessed by a daunting question: *Was the spirit, before his eyes, really Shaheen?*

Rizwan felt utterly out of place in pursuing the venerable beauty, because boys readied their motorbikes near the Bike-Market. Vroom. Vroom. Vroom. Rich boys - sitting in their dark, long cars parked along the footpath kerbs - rolled down the tinted glasses. The poor walked alongside as guilty dreamers. Shopkeepers came out to watch. Soldiers with their SLRs, Carbines and AK-47 rifles came out of the bunkers and watched. Those on the road-side ogled, their gun butts resting on the road, hands moving around the upright black barrels.

Under the shadow of the Information Building,

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

beside the sprawling Russian poplars, the girls went on giggling and talking loudly. In groups, couples and singles, the throng split, scattered and trailed off in different directions, pulling along bunches of hopeful boys.

Rizwan watched Shaheen pass before his eyes. He absorbed the striking vision by closing his eyes and then opening them again. In that instant, behind his closed eyelids, he realised that Shaheen walked with a more girlish tenderness than her previous firm steps.

He drew closer to her and found the discovery accurate. Her spine had straightened, and her gossamer hair bounced on her smooth shoulders. Her feet fell so softly on the footpath that she appeared floating in the air. He wanted to retain her every gesture and every single feature so that when she was inevitably gone, he had her details to live with.

She seemed so beautiful, so seductive, so differently evolved from the rest of the girls that Rizwan could not understand why no one else was as disturbed as he was. Why did no one else's heart grow wild with the fragrant breeze stirred by the folds of her grey frock? Why did everyone not go mad with each stride of her shapely legs, with the swing of her full-sleeved arms and the flight of her angelic hands with nails painted blood-red? He wondered how any man could remain unaffected by the striking features and immaculate symmetry of her devastating beauty. He had not missed a single one of her gestures, not one of the indications of her unearthly beauty.

When she had crossed the dreaded Ghanta Ghar, he

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

was tempted to attribute the apparent radical change in Shaheen's appearance to the effect of *charas*. At once, he was depressed and quite upset with himself for living in an unreal world. But to his utter surprise, he found - as he glanced over his left shoulder to look for the source of an old song - that everyone walking near the mouth of Court Road was actually following her, moving in a congregation.

Bound by the common misery of her seduction, they had become friends ... shared grief. They flung their arms over the shoulders of their adversaries and talked about the degree of sweet pain they were suffering because of her. They were boys of all types. Among others were those known for the rigidity of their hearts in their middle-school days, now kneaded like the marrow in their bones - singing an old, inspiring Bollywood song:

'Kar chale hum fida jan-o-tan saathiyo ... Ab tumhare hawale wattan sathiyo...'

*

Shaheen was too far for the song to reach her ears, but she was aware enough to realise, without any delusion, that she was attracting a crowd. Even the young girls and veiled women stared at her when she passed by. Customers, haggling for the price, lost their voices. With wide-open mouths, they watched her pass by. Cart vendors at the mouth of Court Road forgot to attend to their customers. The traffic policeman in a khaki shirt and long shorts, standing on the round concrete beat, froze in the middle of his command, causing confusion and anger among the drivers.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

And at times, when the drivers were enthralled by her, the policeman would come down from his beat and shout at the drivers for blocking the traffic. And then they would indicate with their solemn chins towards Shaheen, until he too was disturbed by the unearthly beauty walking in the grey-and-white uniform. They watched her move towards the Amira Kadal bridge and felt the tremors in their chests.

Shaheen celebrated her walk, which started at the mouth of the split gate and ended near the Goni Khan Gali. All the way, unwittingly, she destroyed hearts without any discrimination of age or gender. Without any effort, she transformed the outlook of an afternoon ravaged, otherwise, by the dread of grenade blasts.

Her body, too, had changed in response to the enormous public attention she received. Her head, which hooked forward like a hawk during her pre-bath days, was now more upright, giving her a towering image of a leader instead of a predator.

'How come you look so different now,' asked Bublee. 'You look like an angel, Shaheen.'

Shaheen did not tell her the reasons for her change, as she had promised Rukhsana. After the bath, Rukhsana took her to their room wrapped in an endless, striped white towel. There, in the privacy of their twin room, Rukhsana clothed Shaheen in her best dress, combed her wet hair, daubed her cheeks with talc and brushed blood-red paint on her heart-shaped fingernails. 'Now you are ready to meet the Principal ma'am,' said Rukhsana.

On the first night, after Shaheen had resumed

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

college, they talked about her meeting with Professor Shazia Parveen. 'She looked terrified,' revealed Shaheen. 'She stuttered and didn't know what to talk about.' Shaheen also revealed that she knew her as she taught them History.

The next day, in her classroom, Shaheen was asked to see the Principal. 'She has some business with you,' the peon said.

'You have been nominated from your class to participate in the upcoming workshop,' said Professor Shazia Parveen, pretending not to look at her. 'You are the only girl from First Year Arts.'

'What is the workshop about, Ma'am?' Shaheen asked spontaneously.

'Quality of Life.'

*

'Cinema Halls. Beauty Parlours. Liquor Shops,' said Tanvir between bouts of his weeping. 'They are all banned already.' He stopped to allow the knot of tears to release the voice in his throat. 'What will I do now?'

General Sikandar, who at that moment was thinking about the roles he would assign to the mass of people whose businesses his son would stop for good, was woken up from his thoughts. He did not know how to react to this sudden, inexplicable proposition. Banning of certain activities was common knowledge. But they had been so occupied by the errands of Mir Manzil that they did not anticipate the enormous change the public life had gone through recently.

'God has clearly blessed you,' Boba said to

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

weeping Tanvir.

'No,' said General Sikandar. 'It is a matter of grave concern,' he went on. 'It is going to affect the calculation of our party's ranks.'

'...even Maruti Gypsys and Vans are banned,' cried Tanvir.

'Who will join us now?' A worried-looking Commander Hassan asked.

'I don't know nothing,' retorted Tanvir. He went around the Chinar Ghar, entered the house from his mother's side door and disappeared.

'What is our next step,' said Commander Hassan. 'We can't sit like this at home because everyone else has already done whatever was to be done.'

'What do you propose we should do?' General Sikandar asked.

'Your sister needs your help,' interjected Boba. 'Raja Begum wants her to become the Principal of Medical College.'

'Boba, for God's sake, try to understand. We have pledged our lives to the public service,' said General Sikandar, '...not to resolve the caprices of our kin.'

'Buy her a promotion,' she said with disdain. 'Can't you even do that much?'

'We are not contractors anymore, Boba,' said General Sikandar. 'We are freedom fighters now.'

'Whatever you like to say,' Boba said and left the room in disappointment.

'You did not answer me,' repeated Commander Hassan. 'What is our next move?'

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

General Sikandar had no idea and indicated so with an unambiguous pout of his lips.

'Let's hide...' proposed Area Commander Kaka. He was listening silently in the darkness of the corner of the room. On his face, he still carried the signs of nightlong contemplation of his marriage-grudge. But he could not hold himself back when it came to the party's affairs. '...Big guns are always hiding someplace,' he said. 'That's where they plan ... away from the domestic interference.'

'What good is that?' General Sikandar asked.

'It is good,' assured Commander Hassan. 'It is the beginning.'

General Sikandar, without consulting Neelam Khanum, asked confidently, 'Where? Where do we hide?'

'Hospitals,' proposed Area Commander Kaka. 'Big guns always hide in the hospitals.'

*

The 'Quality of Life' workshop turned out to be the kind of event that Shaheen loved. She met the participants in the library, where they gathered to submit their personal information and were briefed about the upcoming workshop. The true purpose of the meeting was to encourage the girls to prepare a speech for the two-day workshop. The list of guests was made available to them so that they knew in advance about the kind of dignitaries who would be present in the workshop.

Shaheen did not give her name for any activity. She

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

was new to these kinds of programs. However, the senior girls who had long, plain hair with yellow streaks and talked in fluent English gave out their names with precise spelling and the kind of speech they would like to deliver.

Outside, while the girls thronged the streets of Lal Chowk, Rizwan was mad with love. He had seen Bublee leave with yet another new girl. Once again, he fell into the trap of his pessimism. But he had learnt from the lessons of meditation that one alone was in a position not only to spot one's ignorance but to get rid of it, too. So, when he was saddened by Shaheen's absence, he did not give in to the easy alternative of going to Pratap Park to smoke *charas*. Instead, he decided to wait.

While Shaheen was interacting with the girls she would be spending her time with for the next few days, Rizwan was engaged by the sight of a boy, and a girl in grey-and-white uniform, talking sweet nothings near Ghanta Ghar. Rizwan was pleased by the way the girl handled the boy's sentiments. He wished the couple all the best in his thoughts. The way they talked, it was evident that they were in love. She handed him a large envelope, and he, in return, gave her a small jewellery case. They parted, saying something that was not audible.

When the couple had disappeared in the day's receding crowd, Rizwan was happy and without thinking the second time, walked straight to Pratap Park to sit in the circle of *Charsis*. Once the smoke was in, he was prompted to give another round of Ghanta

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Ghar certain that Shaheen would have to come to meet him.

There, around the Ghanta Ghar, the sad cart vendors were cursing the lethargy of the late-noon business. The minibus conductors shouted for the customers. Some boys were sitting on their haunches around the *Rista* vendors on the footpath. People who walked by seemed dulled by the time of the day.

Rizwan did not allow himself to be influenced by their stupor. He planned his itinerary back home. He decided to walk back over the Residency Road, cross over to M.A. Road near the Taxi Stand and then take the Exchange Road.

As he began his walk back over the Residency Road, he was shocked by an incredible sight. He spotted Shaheen walking in the distance alongside the Information Building, with her long strides of a leader. Rizwan rubbed his eyes to make sure that it was not in the haze of the *charas* that he was imagining her. But she was real and alone.

Prompted by the conversation he had witnessed a while ago, Rizwan decided to speak to her. He hoped that she would remember him from their last confrontation.

He stood near the Ladakhi vendors in front of the Tyndale Biscoe School. She passed by him without caring for the merchandise scattered on the footpath. Rizwan became conscious of his smelly breath and his words remained stuck in his throat. But he followed her and stopped at the roadside tap that the shopkeepers of Forest Lane had set up to wash their lunch boxes. He

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

flossed and gurgled with the cold water till he could no longer smell the *charas* on his breath. Then he gave her chase.

He found another opportunity near Court Road when a cart selling used shoes passed in front of her. She stopped to allow the cart to move. Rizwan took this opportunity and ran past, turned around and was face to face with her. She did not change her direction, nor did she blink her bright-grey eyes.

Rizwan spoke instantaneously, 'Excuse me…'

'You motherfucker,' she exploded like a hand grenade. 'Do you know who I am?'

Rizwan could not say another word. Nor could he move from his place. Neither did she until she had made him clearly understand his position.

'I'll eat you bite by bite. Bloody 'excuse me'.'

When Shaheen was past the shops displaying roasted chicken on rotating bars, she felt good. After a long time, she had gotten a chance to abuse somebody in public. She always cherished the occasions to ridicule people. It gave her the strength to take on the vagaries of life.

She was alone and felt relieved of an imperceptible burden. With a sincere smile she walked across the Amira Kadal bridge, and then got into a minibus near Hari Sing High Street, asking the teenage bus conductor, 'From where will this go?'

'From the interior road,' he said in his professional way.

*

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

'Great going, brother,' said one of the five guys Rizwan had seen singing in a group at the mouth of Court Road the previous day. Rizwan was still under the shock of the undeserved obscenity when one of them placed his arm over his shoulders. 'You are the lucky one,' he said with a soft smile. 'She only talks to you, bro. Although it breaks our hearts ... but we are so happy for you.'

'We have been waiting for days,' said another. 'But she doesn't give a damn about us.'

It became clear to Rizwan, as the five friends revealed their heartache to him, that they considered themselves 'one' even in an intimate personal relationship like love. As they started walking back towards Lambert Lane, they continued to praise Rizwan's good luck.

Rizwan was utterly confused. For, as far as he remembered, he was abused by Shaheen moments ago. But they went on praising and elaborating on his tenacious love and the favourable response he got.

"Could it be the effects of charas?" He thought. "Either Shaheen's curses were imaginary, or I'm hallucinating."

It was the beginning of a great friendship. Rizwan continued to walk over Residency Road, arms extended over the shoulders of one another, with the five die-hards: Imtiyaz, Aadil, Showkat, Waseem and Gudda. They stopped by a roadside vendor at the mouth of Lambert Lane to take a cup of tea. There, they would laugh at the ironies of love and their miseries. Sometimes, when Rizwan recounted the hazards of an

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

encounter, they would collectively tell him, 'We wish we ran those risks, bro.' Later, they resumed walking leisurely till they reached the tattered 'Lost Paradise' houseboat in Dal Lake.

It was a large houseboat with the diminishing signs of its erstwhile grandeur. Its original name was 'Paradise'. Now, it was in tatters and had been declared unfit for tourist use by the President of the Houseboat Association.

Waseem did not allow his father to auction it. He couldn't imagine seeing it ripped apart by the salvage agents. Instead, he turned it into a library that the tourists of Dal Lake could avail at the rate of one rupee per book per twenty-four hours. It was crammed with Milton's books because Waseem was a die-hard fan of Milton and had graduated in Literature with a Masters in 'Milton's Essay - An Original Enigma'.

The houseboat was renamed 'Lost Paradise' when Javed Bashir, the Trickster of East, visited the houseboat library with his three lovely wives. 'It cannot be anything but 'Lost Paradise',' he said in his typical trickster's demeanour. Waseem was astonished that how it had never occurred to him despite his closeness with Milton.

But for Rizwan, it was a revelation.

It had never occurred to him until then to think that love was the best potion that had ever been invented to make adversaries friends, as Showkat said a week before the crackdown. A day later, Rizwan realised that his five friends, who used to call Shaheen *'Treth'*, *'Qahar'* and *'Balai'*, had sacrificed their love for him

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

and had started considering her as their *'Bhabi'*.

Resurrected by the spirit of romantic martyrdom, the five friends came to see him every day without fail. They braved the aggressive soldiers, whooshing bullets and ear-blasting grenades, and made the tattered 'Lost Paradise' houseboat their meeting place.

*

'It's not the kind of place that you would want to spend the night in,' cautioned the short Nursing Supervisor, donning his official white apron over a large brown sweater. General Sikandar was told that all the militants had left the hospital in a hurry an hour ago. 'It's a deserted place now. Very vulnerable,' continued the Nursing Supervisor. 'Why would you want to stay here?'

'It is for us,' replied General Sikandar with the authority of a leader, '... that they all have left. Now is our time.' He instructed Commander Hassan and Area Commander Kaka to occupy rooms at the two corners of the hospital overlooking the two entrances.

'Remember the first principle of the Guerrilla warfare,' he said. Then he asked the Nursing Supervisor to show him the Operation Theatre. 'I'll sleep there.'

At midnight, he was woken up by a terrified Area Commander Kaka. 'They are at the gate,' he whispered, 'coming towards us.'

General Sikandar, amid the fading dregs of his sleep, could not understand what the whispering was all about and scolded him loudly. 'What's this whispering

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

about? As if the soldiers have come!'

'Yes, it's them,' replied Area Commander Kaka.

'Who?' Concern engulfed General Sikandar's face. 'Is it them? Wake up Manjla Mamoo.'

'Commander Hassan,' said Area Commander Kaka. 'Commander Hassan.'

Commander Hassan was already awake and had not slept a moment. He had been taking rounds of the hospital corridor the whole night and had made a mental map of the entire building. 'They are still at the Emergency,' he reported to General Sikandar. 'There is an exit behind the Oxygen Plant Room.'

'Then what are we waiting for?' He said. 'Let's get going. Earlier the better.'

When Area Commander Kaka was about to move, Commander Hassan stopped him with his extended arm. 'We haven't come here to run away,' said Commander Hassan. 'The area we occupy is the area we have.'

'What do you propose we should do?' General Sikandar asked.

'Operation Theatre is the best place to be in,' said Commander Hassan. 'As far as I know of this building, they won't come here. It doesn't fall in the natural route of the hospital corridor.'

He was wrong because, at that moment, there was banging at the theatre door with wild shouts to open it.

The three brothers looked for an opening other than the split door. The theatre had no windows, and the ceiling was solid. Inside the theatre, besides the three

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

alarmed brothers, was the terrified hospital staff, transfixed. General Sikandar was still on the operating table under the cover of a maroon hospital blanket. Around them were the surgical paraphernalia in large cylindrical steel boxes and kidney-shaped bowls, green aprons, head covers and masks left from the previous surgeries.

'Where are the guns?' Area Commander Kaka whispered.

'At home,' said General Sikandar. 'Safe.'

'Shit,' cursed Area Commander Kaka.

As the split door began to cave in, Commander Hassan saw the blood drain from the face of one female surgeon. Behind the large glasses of the surgeon, he saw the line of blood boundary move down as it passed the ridge of her nose, stopping momentarily for the golden nose-pin, then came down suddenly to her sad lips and became invisible under her feminine chin. As he was following the motion of the blood boundary line, Commander Hassan was planning the escape at the same time. He asked them all to don the green aprons, masks and headcovers, and motioned General Sikandar to lie flat on the table and pretend to be being operated upon.

'Who is the leader?' General Sikandar asked.

'It doesn't matter,' said the bespectacled surgeon, adjusting the face mask around her blood-less nose.

'Shut up,' retorted General Sikandar. He came down from the operating table, snatched the green apron from Commander Hassan's hands and asked him

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

to lie in his place. 'You,' he ordered. 'Yes. You!'

Commander Hassan lay down on the operating table as was instructed by General Sikandar. They arranged the surgical instruments on the operating table to play the farce and asked one of the nurses to open the door before they broke it from the outside.

The soldiers burst in cursing and shouting, 'What took you so long?'

'We are in the middle of a serious surgery,' said the bespectacled surgeon. 'This is a restricted area. You are not allowed in here.'

'We can go to any damn place,' said the one who looked like their ringleader. 'Don't try to teach me.'

The bespectacled surgeon got out of the way from the operating table. 'Look here,' she said. 'We are operating on him.'

At that moment, Commander Hassan, knowing that they would eventually come for him, took the scalpel stealthily from one of the kidney-shaped bowls and hid it under the blanket.

'They are faking it,' shouted one of the soldiers who saw the patient's hand move under the blanket.

'Yes,' said the other one. 'Look,' he continued, pointing at the overhead lights. 'They are off.'

The ringleader, with the help of his gun barrel, separated the staff in front of the operating table, and lifted the blanket from the patient. When the blanket was completely off the table, a trickle of blood fell from the patient's half-cut belly.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Chapter Eight

Overwhelmed by the reassurance of his new-fangled friends, Rizwan eventually construed Shaheen's abusive reply as a *charas*-induced hallucination. Although he was constantly unsettled by the efficiency with which she had delivered the obscenities, on Wednesday, he once again stood in the vicinity of the college in the guise of a window shopper. He saw her walk beside Bublee, cross the road near the Octopus Chinar and walk over the footpath to his side.

She walked with an air of 'not acknowledging him'. When she was nearer, however, she looked hard at him at close quarters, pretending to look at the blue, embroidered silk *Pherran,* hanging around an alabaster mannequin, placed in the showcase behind Rizwan.

'Poor mannequins,' she said to no one in particular. 'Eyes open but no sight.' Their eyes met for a fleeting moment. In that instant, she not only acknowledged his presence but also betrayed no dislike.

They were right.

That night, he relived her fierce glare. Ever since he had heard the curse, Rizwan's nights had changed forever. If he was not in the 'Lost Paradise' houseboat celebrating his new friendship, he was sitting in his bedroom, in the middle of his narrow bed, thinking what Shaheen must be doing. In his delirium, he let the hours pass by. Ten o'clock. Eleven o'clock. Twelve

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

o'clock. One o'clock. Two o'clock. Three o'clock. Four o'clock. Five o'clock. And when the day's first *Azan* would be called out, he'd be so exhausted by his nightlong, fruitless, wishful thinking that he would drift into a deep slumber only to be jolted back awake by the *Azan* at noon. And then he would leave for Lal Chowk without eating anything and return in the darkness.

Nishat Bibi was the first to notice the signs of inconsistency in Rizwan's behaviour. She had been watching him since the afternoon of *Eid* when he came back for lunch. She saw that he had started walking with strange, slow and rather open steps, like those of the *Charsis* roaming in the interior city, staring into the space and mumbling something repeatedly.

Two days earlier, when he came home late in the evening with a more upright cadence, he not only refused to eat his dinner but did not come down at the usual hour for ablution as well. Then he began to stay missing for entire nights, and whenever he came home, he was not himself. He displayed signs of living in another realm, which Mansoor sometimes confused with the state of trance. Although he thought he was more considerate of the two parents and claimed to know his son more than his mother, Nishat Bibi corrected him. 'Sins-of-mine and nothing else!' She said. 'These are the symptoms of something grave. Don't you see the poor fellow has no joy on his face?'

She could not get Rizwan to speak out about his torment. For days, she created reasons for him to talk to her, but he did not open up. On the third day, she put two spoonsful of salt in his favourite omelette instead

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

of a half, but he did not show any signs of having encountered any abnormality. He took his tomato soup with excessive chilli the same way he drank his sugared *Nun chai*. He did not mind eating raw fish and burnt potato chips.

When she was tired of spoiling his favourite foods, she went to see her *Peer* at the base of the Hariparbat Hills, who prescribed a potion suitable for settling the erratic heartbeats and purifying the clogged lungs.

She asked him to give her something that could treat a wandering mind, but the *Peer* did not change his prognosis, and gave her a very logical explanation. 'Only that stays into the mind which has affected the heart.' Nishat Bibi, unable to comprehend *Peer's* knotty logic, took the medicine that his assistants wrapped in quarters of newspaper.

She mixed the medicines with rice for lunch on Wednesday, which Rizwan left without eating.

*

The workshop started with a luncheon. 'What good is life?' Professor Salma Aly claimed in a firm yet cajoling voice. 'That is not abundant with food.'

It was the first buffet meal for Shaheen. She had only known that it was uncivilised of guests to serve the food themselves. So, naturally, she did not hurry to pick up her plate and pounce on the food the way all others did. She waited in her chair for them to heap up the food on their plates with the large, sparkling serving spoons, slotted serving spoons, serving forks and serving tongs. She observed them closely so as to make no mistakes. She was the last to pick up the snow-white

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

bone-china plate from the stack and then took very little from only those dishes that had meat in them.

Professor Salma Aly was watching Shaheen's every move and did not waste any time speaking out. 'In life,' said Professor Salma Aly, 'she who lets others ahead of herself is always the winner.'

'You mean,' replied Professor Qurrat-ul-ain with a smirk, '...in the slow race of competing for the last spot?'

The hall burst into an impromptu laughter. Shreds of rice, mutton, chicken and cottage cheese escaped the mouths of the participants and got spattered on the large, sparkling table of straight-grained teak-top.

Professor Salma Aly was alarmed at the eating habits of her esteemed guests, but to avoid hurting their sentiments, she steadfastly continued the conversation that Professor Qurrat-ul-ain had inadvertently started.

'Exactly,' said Professor Salma Aly, to the utter surprise of the participants. 'In life... she lives longer.'

No one understood the meaning of her words. Only Shaheen spoke. 'What does it mean, Ma'am?'

'It means,' replied Professor Salma Aly, 'in life, all pursuits...are the pursuits of death. The longer you take, the longer you live.' She did not waste any time introducing herself to Shaheen, and in turn, she asked her about her antecedents. Shaheen answered only after she had swallowed the food she was munching, as was instructed by Rukhsana.

In fact, the two sisters had been up all night. Rukhsana read to Shaheen from the 'Rudiments of

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Etiquettes' by Aamina & Nomaan. The book was brought by Khwaja Samad Mir when he visited Bukhara in search of an oriental bride for his son, Iqbal. But Iqbal not only disagreed to marry a non-Kashmiri but displayed his earnest desire not to marry at all. He enjoyed the days of his youth on the banks of Dal Lake. At four o'clock, his friends came to ride the boat and went to sip *Nun chai* in the shade of Char-Chinar.

Fridays took him to Hariparbat Hills and Kastoor Pend near the shrine of Makhdoom Sahb from where he contemplated the city of Srinagar. In the evening, his friends returned to play carom till late at night. Then they sat around one *Hooka* in his room and shared the stories of their love. Iqbal had found himself too tall for love and was the only loner in the company. On Sundays, they roamed in the Mughal Gardens and took pleasure in watching gravity-fed water rise through the fountains hewed in stone.

'I'd rather be alone and free,' he told his father, '... than in a company and vulnerable.' He ended up marrying Dr Firdousa to fulfil the last wish of his dying father.

Nonetheless, besides the cover page, two front pages of the book were missing, and Khwaja had written the name of the book and its authors in his curvy hand on the page that the publisher had left blank 'intentionally'. Rukhsana explained the difficult Persian words to Shaheen, the mannerism of eating together that involved controlling the display of munching, sounds of slurping, and the crucial role of gravity and atmospheric pressure; the benefits of being

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

polite and altruistic; and the essentials of the subtle language of love. The book, however, threw no light on handling the buffet-type meals on account of the oriental origin of its authors.

Professor Salma Aly took great interest in Shaheen because she was the first to speak among the students. That was why, during the two days, Shaheen became the most sought-after student of the workshop. Everyone preferred to converse with her because whatever the query they proposed, she responded in simple and befitting words. To the enquiry about the essence of life, she said that one should be bestowed with two lives: one to learn from and the other to live with. When they asked her a question related to handling the obnoxious people in life, she replied in clear terms that all obnoxiousness was a result of bad parenting.

Professor Salma Aly was not only impressed at her level but also wanted other girls, who were all seniors to Shaheen, to follow in her footsteps.

That was the beginning of a life-changing experience for Shaheen. All the senior girls whose hair had coloured streaks or curled sides or was fashioned in mod-cuts tried to make contact with Shaheen, and she, in turn, constrained to be polite, reciprocated their friendship. But on the day her new friends gave a surprise visit to Mir Manzil to get permission from Dr Firdousa so that Shaheen could go with them for a day excursion to Gulmarg, there had been an untimely death in the family.

*

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Commander Hassan died three days after cutting his healthy belly with a scalpel on the operation table of Kashmir Medical College and Hospital. He died of septicaemia because he was operated in a hurry with unsterilised instruments. Dr Firdousa tried all her expertise and connections to save him clandestinely, but the infection spread far too quickly than they had anticipated. The bespectacled surgeon stayed overnight to look after the post-surgical complications. All the para-medical staff remained alert as long as their senses allowed. Then, after midnight of the second day, they began to falter in reading his temperature and blood pressure and injected medicines in his line, which were not the best for his health condition.

Nonetheless, the condition of Commander Hassan never showed any sign of improvement from the moment he cut his belly. The ringleader of the soldiers had inserted the barrel of his gun in the cut to see for himself that the cut was real. Commander Hassan wailed for the rest of the night, writhing in pain and humiliation. Three days later, his body was buried in his ancestral graveyard.

Throughout the burial process, Area Commander Kaka was all rage. He went back to the hospital with the intention of thrashing the bespectacled surgeon with his bare hands. But when he faced her, his limbs froze without any apparent reason. He thrashed a male nurse instead.

At the graveyard, General Sikandar instructed him not to go to the hospital anymore. 'Those are the places of death,' he told him. 'That's the last place we should

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

be in.'

'No,' replied adamant Area Commander Kaka. 'The area we occupy is the area we have,' he quoted the deceased Commander Hassan, now his inspiration. 'Our martyr brother was right,' he went on. 'You concede an inch; they take your yard.'

He did not want to wait for the three obligatory days of mourning to pass. He constantly pulled at the shirt of General Sikandar, pleading to accompany him to the hospital for hiding. 'That's the only place I want to hide now.'

*

'Manjla Mamoo,' cried an inconsolable Boba. 'Poor fellow died a bachelor.'

Dr Firdousa did not cry in public, not because of the 'instructions' from Neelam Khanum, but because she believed that Manjla Mamoo was a born martyr. 'He always wanted to die for somebody,' she said to pacify Boba.

Rukhsana cried in solitude because it was impossible to cry in the same room that the frantic Shaheen cried in. 'Manjla Mamoo,' she cried. 'You cleaned me with your bare hands when my merchant father wouldn't even touch my forehead.'

Three days later, General Sikandar gave in to Area Commander Kaka's insistence. General Sikandar said goodbye to Boba in public and Neelam Khanum in her room. Area Commander Kaka did not try to make contact with Neelam Khanum as he still begrudged the double-marriage. They took with them all the arms and

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

ammunition they had received from Kupwara, bundled in an old cement sack.

'Our weapon is our breath. Our breath is our weapon,' claimed General Sikandar. He was of the opinion that God forgave those who committed a mistake once. 'If you repeat the same mistake,' he declared, 'even the world won't forgive you.'

He was right. Because when they were entering the hospital corridor on the fourth day of the mourning, the tall and mild-mannered Principal, Dr Ravi Kumar Bakhshi, did not allow them to move in. 'They are fakes,' he shouted. 'They have no weapons.'

Area Commander Kaka dropped the large sack on the floor, loosened its noose, pulled the mouth of the sack open, dug in his hands, groped for a while and then took out a Chinese pistol. He pulled the safety latch and aimed at the unwavering Principal to warn him.

'Don't threaten me with that toy-gun,' laughed the Principal.

Area Commander Kaka did not speak a single word. He tightened his grip over the trigger and fired. The bullet hit the Principal right at the upper part of the tapering saffron *tilak*. His face froze in the act of his half-grin, and the blood spattered over his white apron and soaked his loose, inner blue sweater.

The loud noise of the gunshot unleashed a wave of alarm in the hospital. There was confusion, and people began to run helter-skelter until, from the College-side gate, the unmistakable shouts of the soldiers were heard.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

'I told you,' whispered General Sikandar. 'This is the place of death.'

'His death,' Area Commander Kaka said, pointing to the corpse of the Principal.

'I'm talking about the soldiers,' replied General Sikandar.

Area Commander Kaka placed the pistol at the back, in the belt of his pants, closed the noose around the mouth of the sack, hurled the sack over his left shoulder and said, 'We'll come back with a plan and never leave this place.'

*

On Wednesday, when Rizwan came to Lal Chowk, he did not find Shaheen. He was mad with love but did not give in to the immediate relief of *charas*. He met Bublee again. She tried to avoid him and gave him every reason not to pursue her. But he not only pursued her but also made it impossible for her to avoid him by clasping his palms together to express his inexpressible humility. It also meant the Hindu salutation, Namaskar.

Constrained by his persistence and humility, Bublee gave him the address of Shaheen's home but warned him that he would not find her there. Rizwan did not heed her warning and headed for Mir Manzil. There, the heavy street door was closed from inside.

Rizwan walked back from the wall to gauge the possibility of scaling it. It was a tall mud-wall. An unkempt jumble of Devil's ivy and Flame vine hung over its top and side. It seemed difficult to pass the thick barricade of mud and plants. He wasn't sure if he

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

really wanted to do it. After all, he was thinking of breaching a household. It was not only a crime but immoral as well. But he could not live with the fact that while she was there, inside that monumental brick-house choked by discoloured Morning glory; he would remain without seeing her. He looked around to ensure that no one was looking. It was still early for people to return home.

He went as far back as he thought was necessary to climb the wall running. As he came closer, he found small indentations in the mud-wall that years of mad rains had caused on its sides. He scaled it without much effort. When he was on the sagging bed of plants, he spotted the wooden framework of grapevine to one side.

He slowly walked over the sturdy framework and clambered down without making any noise. At that moment, he was reminded of the whistling cicadas as if it was autumn. He walked slowly over the cobbled courtyard towards the street door and lifted the latch from its place so that in the event of being spotted, he could run away with ease.

He walked to the porch and found no one. There was nothing, not even a sound, but a hint of heavy snoring that came from the backside. He came closer and corrected himself. It was the gurgling of a *Hooka.* He followed the sound to the back side and saw small clouds of blue smoke escape a half-open window.

He came back to the porch and entered inside the dark corridor. At that moment, the noise of falling utensils alarmed him. He couldn't decide which way to

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

go but did not allow himself to be discouraged. He was inspired by an illogical belief that Shaheen would come to his rescue. He walked inwardly with caution, and clambered the wooden stairs slowly by touching the Persian carpet with the tips of his toes.

On the second-storey corridor, he could feel the omnipresence of Shaheen. She was there somewhere. The space smelt of her.

All six doors were shut, but none was locked. He watched his breath and, without thinking, followed his heart. He opened the first door from his left. It opened inwards without making much noise. He looked inside. The bedding was left by someone in haste. He walked in and found the grey frock and white shalwar hanging from a nail on the wall. He could smell Shaheen's sweat in the room. Her presence was palpable.

He looked around. There was a dismantled *Wurusi* and another similar room beyond it. There, on the second bed, the bedding was made neat and clean. The room looked ordered and had a teak addressing table, a chair, a study table and a rack full of law books. He turned his eyes to where the uniform was hanging; he found the room bare. He looked up and saw his distorted reflection in the pink tiles. His heart ached for Shaheen, and he lunged at the ruffled bed with a bang. He thought of her warm, brooding female body.

As the smell of maroon quilt filled his nostrils, a wild male cry came from below. 'Thief'. Then the round man with a chequered cap came out in the courtyard and shouted. 'Thief. Thief. Thief.'

Instantaneously, the courtyard was filled with

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

people. Rizwan looked from the chinks of the curtain and cursed himself for lifting the lock latch from the door. He heard the thumping of the people running over the wooden stairs. He had to hide someplace.

Instinctively, he went under the bed, but from there, he could see the half-open door and felt exposed. Terrified, he got up, walked over the *Wurusi* partition, slipped under the meticulously made bed and hid behind the pink, floral bedsheet. From there, he could see another door that he had not anticipated. But the two doors were already open, and it was too late to change places.

People raked the entire room, lifted the curtains to let the daylight in, lifted the maroon quilt from the ruffled bed, got under it, crossed over the *Wurusi* and when they were about to lift the floral, pink bedsheet, an unsteady, gurgling male voice stopped them with authority. 'Don't you dare touch that,' Iqbal commanded, fearing that in the guise of helpers, people may take advantage and steal what the thieves had left untouched. 'Come out of that room.'

In fact, when Raja Begum left for Chinar Ghar, she warned Gopa to watch out, for there was enough jewellery in the house for Rukhsana's upcoming marriage. It was usual for the bride's parents not to leave their homes unattended as long as the jewellery was there. Dr Firdousa could not care less and ran out to attend her brother's funeral. But Iqbal was not moved and was only concerned about the marriage of Rukhsana. He drove away all the people, looked around with disinterest and went down again. Rizwan was

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

relieved.

*

When the Mirs had returned from Chinar Ghar, Raja Begum could not hide her enthusiasm. 'The Principal is dead now,' she said suggestively to Dr Firdousa.

Dr Firdousa did not understand the proposition. 'It shouldn't have happened,' she replied.

'It's God's will,' said Raja Begum. 'God is giving shape to my wish.'

'You wished the Principal Sir dead?' asked Dr Firdousa in total disbelief. 'Why would you do that?'

'I didn't want him dead, poor fellow,' replied Raja Begum. 'God wants you to be the Principal.'

'What?' Dr Firdousa exclaimed. 'I don't want people to die so that I get promoted. That is disgusting.'

'That's not disgusting. That's life!'

'Anyway,' said Dr Firdousa calmly, 'I'm far from becoming the Principal. I'm fourth in the line.'

'That is for your brothers to sort out,' concluded Raja Begum.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Chapter Nine

Once the mourning period at Chinar Ghar was over, Shaheen went back to her new friends who had postponed their excursion. They had not deferred it on account of her Mamoo's death, though, but because of a film shooting that was scheduled later in the week at Pahalgam. Shaheen did not want to go with them. She was still in mourning. 'I can't,' she confided to Yasmin, the girl with long yellow streaks in her black hair. 'You people go. I don't feel like going out.'

'That is exactly why you should go,' retorted Arifa Jameel.

'No one needs to go out more than the ones who don't feel like going out,' said Laila.

Three friends wove a web of reasons, counter reasons and abstract logic, making it impossible for Shaheen to say 'no'. They went to Pahalgam on the first day of the scheduled shooting. When they reached there, the shooting was already underway.

The moment Shaheen saw the actress, she was mesmerised, enthralled by her iridescent black shirt and silky, blood-red half-pants. The sight cured her of her sad spirits. The actress who ran, danced and sang among the pine trees - along the thundering white-water streams - wore her clothes in a way that Shaheen had never seen. It seemed so foreign and so thrilling to her that she felt an urge to admire it. An electrifying

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

wave surged upward from her neck when the actress's two deranged teeth sparkled: one each at either extreme of her mouth. Her long black hair was plain and regular, and she swayed it with pleasure. In the shafts of sunlight that broached the wall of tall pine trees, the silky strands sparkled like murmuring lake waves at noon.

Her mouth was poetry. The red-painted lips were never still, inspiring a sense of adventure in Shaheen's virgin heart. When the word 'action' was spoken, an instantaneous song filled the shady valley with such an intense bang that its initial two lines remained fixed in Shaheen's memory forever.

Jab hum jawan hoonge... jaane kahan hoonge... Leykin jahan hoonge...wahan fariyaad karengey... Tujhe yaad karengey...

It was her first such outing and introduction to a mysterious activity. When that actress laughed in the lap of her male counterpart, it incited those hidden feelings in Shaheen's heart that her elder sister was still unaware of: subversive, alien and enchanting like a secret.

But as if hungry for a lost memory, she grew melancholic only to be rescued by the remembrance of the tall guy with black brows, who used 'excuse me' as his silence breaker at Lal Chowk. Her heart leapt for him. At once, she wanted him right there and then, with all her heart.

Shaheen remained unusually calm. She saw the actress again and again in her thoughts. She saw her laughing so charmingly that she felt envious for a

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

moment. The valley where the shooting was done was filled with her laughter - spilling from its surroundings. But moments later, when the actress ran like a clownish bull, Shaheen's heart again leapt for the guy with black brows. In the early evening, when the crew had packed up for the day, Shaheen felt terribly sad. A sudden feeling of an incredible loss made her heart sink.

Although she came home quiet and withdrawn, she had learned to dream in that pine-surrounded valley with a thundering stream running through it. She had seen herself beyond the limits of time, rolling in an iridescent black shirt and silky blood-red half pants, laughing in a man's lap whom she longed to be the guy with black brows. In that one day, she had lived beyond the limitations of her ordinary life.

*

On Saturday, when Rizwan spotted Shaheen again, he saw that her grey eyes carried a tender secret like the shadow of a clear glass. After his escapade in the *Wurusi*-parted bedrooms of Mir Manzil, he loved her more. He wanted to hug her the way he had lunged at her bed. To his amazement, she did not shy away from him, nor was she angry. He found that the grey of her pupils was not encircled by black rings but was open like waters without a horizon.

His love for her was deeper now. She, in return, was talking to him in the language of silence. He thought she was defying the tradition of conversing using voice, and her love was rebellious in its own way. He wanted to respect her way of expression but could not find any alternative but to follow her.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

On Monday, Shaheen jerked her head to hurl her intense black hair over her forehead. Then, she let it fall again so that she could continue dissipating the energy of her concealed acknowledgement of Rizwan's intentions. From that day on, whenever she spotted him, she changed her route, but only after she had ensured he had spotted her. She continued to play hide and seek with him so that, once again, Rizwan was tempted to speak to her. But once again, his courage gave way, and he was distressed by the feeling of a freefall.

Sometimes, she'd be just out of reach. He'd catch a glimpse of her bouncing hair in the crowd of the uniformed girls. When chance permitted, he would cross the road and give chase, but she was gone, slipped through busy shoppers, lost around a corner, a narrow side street, or behind a cart vendor and then reappeared before him to his immense relief when he least expected her. As he began to pursue her every day like a ghost, she haunted him every night.

He continued staying awake all night in the middle of his bed. He ate little and talked even less to others because, most of the time, he was busy talking to himself. He remained lost in his thoughts and walked like the animals at the bottom of an aquarium.

Nishat Bibi revealed to the *Peer* that anything that had to be eaten at a particular time would not work. 'He doesn't eat like normal people,' she told him.

'In that case,' said the *Peer*, 'give me the details of his abnormalities.'

When Nishat Bibi told him everything down to the

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

last detail about what she had observed, the *Peer* was exasperated. 'Oh. You women!' He exclaimed. 'Bring him to me tomorrow.'

The slanting courtyard at *Peer's* house was filled with people having broken limbs and displaced gut alignments, sad faces and ulcer-ridden stomachs. Rizwan's examination revealed that he had no fracture, no dislocation, and no specific origin of pain anywhere in his body and that his malformation could only be allowed to ease naturally. All that was done by the *Peer* was to paste a glued paper - with one hundred and eleven needled perforations and a small hole cut in the middle - exactly at the place of the navel.

Nothing could be done to stop the sudden erratic breathing, loss of appetite and staring into space. His disorientation and the disorder of talking to himself were expected to ebb by the end of the Fall. However, his perpetual smiling with a joyless look was incomprehensible. To conclude the proceedings, the *Peer* told Nishat Bibi that the symptoms of misaligned–*Naap* were the same as that of all those men who had fallen over their hearts.

He made Rizwan rest his entire body on an upright china tea cup - lie flat, face down and the cup placed exactly under his navel. Rizwan cried in pain but the *Peer* persisted with the procedure. After every session of a painful balancing act, the *Peer* glued the perforated paper around his navel. 'I have aligned the *Naap* [1] correctly. This will hold until the next session,' the

[1] Naap: a mythical balance of harmonies whose imbalance causes symptoms of listlessness, exhaustion and mood change.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Peer said.

*

General Sikandar was contemplating ways to take control of Kashmir Medical College and Hospital when Raja Begum summoned him to Mir Manzil. Neelam Khanum was against the idea that the General visit Raja Begum. She wanted the General to command Raja Begum to Chinar Ghar instead. 'Try to understand, for God's sake. She is my sister's mother-in-law,' replied an exasperated General Sikandar. 'You must be crazy!'

At the moment he entered the living room of Mir Manzil, Raja Begum was talking on the telephone with a relative of hers about the state of Kashmiri Hindus in the wake of recent killings. When Raja Begum put down the receiver of the silver-coloured apparatus, the first thing she asked General Sikandar was about Dr Firdousa. 'Badda Mamoo,' she said, 'they must be waiting for your sister to become the Principal now. What are you people doing about it?'

General Sikandar was petrified by the way she addressed him. He did not answer her immediately because he was reminded of the sound advice of his blond wife. *"I'm General Sikandar, not Badda Mamoo," he thought.* But he said, 'We can talk about this when you come to Chinar Ghar.'

'Fortieth is still long away,' Raja Begum replied casually. 'They may come again before that. What shall I tell them? My esteem is at stake, Badda Mamoo!'

General Sikandar breathed heavily. He swallowed the fire of his rage noisily. His weight began to settle in his legs, and he felt unable to get up. 'I have other

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

important things to do,' he managed to say between the waves of his heavy breathing.

'For a brother,' said Raja Begum convincingly, 'there should be nothing more important than the future of his married sister.'

Raja Begum's words replayed in General Sikandar's thoughts for two straight days. He was unable to sleep. Besides, the burning issue of controlling the hospital kept him on his toes. 'What do we do about Kashmir Medical College and Hospital,' he asked Area Commander Kaka.

'Big guns always take control of what they deal with,' replied Area Commander Kaka.

'How do you propose that we take control of Kashmir Medical College and Hospital?'

'By installing our own Principal there,' said Area Commander Kaka. 'Once the Principal is ours,' he said, beaming with pride, 'the hospital is ours. All we need as of now,' he continued, '...is a Principal.'

Despite his lack of common sense, General Sikandar did not fail to connect Raja Begum's wish to Area Commander Kaka's insight. *"Firdousa Baji," he thought.*

*

Shaheen continued walking with Bublee while Rizwan pursued her. He continued to follow her and always lost her in the confusion of the minibuses in which she disappeared. On Tuesday, while he forced his way through the tightly packed mob, he found her walking behind him because she was hiding behind the

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

driver's seat. He stopped to let her pass. As she passed by him, she goaded his left thigh with the bones of her left knee, and giggled. But moments later, he could not find her in the minibus. He did not know where she had alighted even though the minibus had only one door.

When he got down, he realised the perforated glue paper had come off his tummy in excitement. He hurried to 'Lost Paradise' for a solution. There, his friends had already kept another one ready for him. 'In the pursuit of love,' they all said together, 'your friends are your senses.'

Rizwan wrote a letter to Shaheen but found no opportunity to pass it on. On Wednesday, he lost her sight while getting in the minibus. On Thursday, amid the tightly packed passengers, someone spoke in his left chin that he was breathing into his nose. By that time, Rizwan was convinced that all the minibuses plying in the city had only one door, and that was why when chance permitted, people got in and out through windows until a succession of grenade explosions in Lal Chowk brought out a decree from the soldiers that all the minibus windows be barred with chicken-mesh from Friday onwards.

*

Rukhsana did not believe it. To confirm the folly of the diktat, she promised Shaheen that she would see it for herself on Saturday. Actually, she wanted to buy something for her fiancé, who had sent her a leather jacket and a *Pherran* that was tailored in Colorado. She wondered what she could get from the limited gift shops in Lal Chowk.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

They bought a brown *Karakul* but did not go back to Shakti Sweets for *Chola-puri*. Instead, they got into the minibus to reach home early because it was not yet forty days to Manjla Mamoo's death.

Rizwan took out the letter from his shirt pocket near the Ghanta Ghar and read it for the last time.

'My blessings for you are sweet. My reverences for you are Iqbal's inspiration. And since Ghalib tells me that apart from God is nothing: all that is, is God...my worships. And silences, for you are my love and silence alone can praise a thing beyond all praise...'

There was no name at the beginning or at the end to confuse the reader if it got into the wrong hands - to preserve the anonymity of both - the sender and the recipient.

Rizwan got into the minibus and placed the letter in the 'Times of India' newspaper in a way so that Shaheen could see what he was doing. Then he approached her. She was not accompanied by Bublee but someone wearing a red-and-white floral kameez-shalwar which instantly reminded him of the primed bed of the twin bedroom of Mir Manzil. *"What if they are the same blood?" he dreaded.* But by that time, he had placed the newspaper in Shaheen's lap.

As if surrounded by the buzz of a hundred thousand bees, Shaheen did not have the slightest of clues to handle the newspaper in her lap. She was overwhelmed by the novelty of the act, but she was aware that Rukhsana was beside her. She wanted to know what was written in that letter but was warned by an inner voice. To rule out her involvement in the affair

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

outright, she threw the newspaper out through the space between the window pane and the frame of the chicken mesh. '*Pagal*,' she said to no one in particular.

That night, the sisters talked about Rizwan. 'I don't know him,' Shaheen vouched in her defence. 'I discouraged him. But he is bent upon following me.'

Rukhsana looked at her with a hidden smile. 'Why did you throw away the newspaper then?'

'I did not want his letter.'

'What letter?' Rukhsana asked. 'I'm talking about the newspaper.'

'He put the letter in the newspaper.'

'How do you know?' Rukhsana asked. 'He did not tell you anything.'

'I saw him placing a letter in the newspaper,' Shaheen clarified.

'How come I did not see what you alone could see?'

Shaheen pouted her lips. 'How should I know?'

Rukhsana now let the smile appear on her lips. 'Only you could see such things,' she said. 'Because you see what you want to see!'

Shaheen gave her a look of genuine surprise. 'What do you mean?'

'He is in it...' concluded Rukhsana, '...as much as you are!'

*

General Sikandar thought it a wise decision to plan his first mission in front of Neelam Khanum. 'Our belief teaches us,' he said in the meeting with Area

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Commander Kaka and Neelam Khanum, 'that we would do well if we consult one another before doing anything important.' Neelam Khanum did not interrupt him. 'To take control of Kashmir Medical College and Hospital,' he concluded. '... we must install our own Principal there.'

Neelam Khanum could not hold herself from speaking and asked him in simple terms that why they needed to take control of Kashmir Medical College and Hospital in the first place.

'Because our brother was martyred there,' answered Area Commander Kaka bluntly. 'That is why.'

'But he was responsible for his own death,' said Neelam Khanum behind her veil. 'Go. Ask Firdousa Baji.'

'He was responsible,' clarified General Sikandar, '...for saving our lives. A true martyr!' He went on and elaborated on how it was their martyr brother's wish to take control of what they had laid their hands on. 'What we hold,' he said with finality, 'is what we have.'

He explained the mission to the two meeting members and the way it was to be accomplished. He, however, did not mention the obvious collateral benefit of it concerning Firdousa Baji, thinking that it would affect the inviolability of the mission.

Area Commander Kaka voluntarily took the responsibility of eliminating the three candidates for the post of Principal Kashmir Medical College and Hospital, to clear the way for Firdousa Baji. Once she was in the chair of Principal, they'd have the entire

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

hospital at their disposal. General Sikandar was so proud of Area Commander Kaka that he instantly elevated him to the position of Commander by kissing him on his forehead in the presence of his wife.

'I'm honoured,' said Commander Kaka. 'I'll not disappoint you, General.' With those words, he loosened the noose of the cement sack they had received from Kupwara, groped for a while, took out his Chinese pistol and walked out of Chinar Ghar to accomplish his mission.

'Be careful,' instructed General Sikandar. 'The way of good is always hard.'

*

For Rizwan, the surprise was enormous. Shaheen had not read the letter, and yet sensed his heart's desire.

'Please don't try to talk to me directly,' said Bublee on behalf of Shaheen. Bublee had separated from Shaheen after they had crossed the Amira Kadal bridge. Then she motioned Rizwan to follow her. Shaheen stayed near the cart vendors selling fried snacks. Rizwan looked at her and saw that she was wearing a sandal with crisscrossing leather straps to hold the foot efficiently. He left towards the Goni-Khan Gali, where Bublee was talking to a shopkeeper selling school bags.

'You can consider me,' Bublee said with a frank smile, '...as your messenger now.'

Rizwan looked at Shaheen standing near the hearth where long, red flames leapt at the large, blackened fry pan. She hurled her hair over her forehead and looked away towards the rusty tomb of Ragu Nath Mandir.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Rizwan looked up and thanked his God in the heavens. Then, he was reminded of the grenade explosion that had caused Shaheen to make a U-turn. He thanked the anonymous hand that had hurled the grenade, the fingers that fired the reflex gunshots, and the stampede that brought the whole thing together. He thanked the entire Lal Chowk for being the way it was, the existence of the misleading Ghanta Ghar. He thanked the combination of time and space that gave birth to love. He thanked Bublee for bringing him the message of love. He thanked Shaheen for accepting his love. Then he remembered the stupid words written on the back of the three-wheeled auto-rickshaw - 'love is pain' - and laughed. He thanked his own obstinacy for not giving up, for not getting swayed by the silly quotes. Then he laughed at his stupidity after realising *'as if he had any choice'!*

That day, Rizwan did not go to his home but headed straight to Pratap Park for incredible events had happened. He couldn't take it and needed to dissipate the overwhelming emotion. He took the burning cigarette between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand like a pro and took a couple of long drags.

'A happiness of such magnitude,' said Amjad, the heavyset *Charsi*, '...ought to be measured on the Richter scale.'

'A happiness of that nature,' replied Rizwan, '...is to be compared with death.'

That night, Rizwan thought about the nature of love and was astonished to realise that out of all emotional perils and misfortunes, love alone was invariable. It

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

was sweet in the act and sweeter on recollection. All else was nightmarish in the act and only consoling on recollection.

*

The next day, Rizwan handed Bublee the same letter he had placed in the 'Times of India' Newspaper. He rewrote it in the 'Lost Paradise' houseboat with the help of his friends, who failed to make any connection between Mirza Ghalib, Iqbal and love at Lal Chowk. 'It is the same thing,' explained Rizwan. 'Theirs leads to enlightenment. Mine leads to God.'

Nevertheless, Rizwan handed the letter-carrying newspaper to Bublee while his eyes were on Shaheen. They stopped around a deserted cart selling old books. Shaheen did not pretend to look at the books as Rizwan had anticipated, but she looked back at him without staring, as if responding to the letter she had not read yet. Her lips quivered; her eyes bowed under the unbearable weight of secrecy. She wanted him; he could see that in her horizon-less pupils.

Rizwan was invaded by the miserable look that she carried for her inexpressible love.

'Is she going to respond in the same manner?' Aadil asked while Rizwan was still writing the letter.

Rizwan nodded with a shake of his head.

'Does that mean,' said Gudda, 'that from now on, we will have 'Times of India' every day ... for free?'

'Not only will we be getting 'Times of India',' replied Rizwan, ' ... but Mirs as well.'

The first reply came on Friday, concealed not in

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

'Times of India' but in 'Greater Kashmir'. They all laughed and rejoiced in celebration of the success of Rizwan's love. They played loud music on Waseem's Phillips tape-recorder-cum-player and sang together until late evening. But amid that loud music and congregational singing, Rizwan was lost in the depths of desolation that Shaheen had expressed. She had written her letter very short.

'No matter how many worship him,' she had written. 'God is still lonely.'

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Chapter Ten

A drizzle was falling when Commander Kaka came out on the road. No one had come out with an umbrella yet. Tiny drops wandering in the air looked inconsequential. The early morning rush of Wednesday was beginning to pick up as women haggled with the vegetable mongers and roadside vendors. At the grocer's shop, mothers were getting candies for their uniformed children. A small group waited at the butcher's shop as he quartered the skinned sheep hanging from the iron hooks.

Commander Kaka approached the deserted milkman. Dr Razdan lived in an old house with wooden windows. The milkman indicated with his outstretched arm towards the old brick house. 'There,' he said, thinking that Commander Kaka needed to see him for his health matters. 'He has not left yet.'

At that moment, the rain intensified.

Commander Kaka hastened his steps to avoid getting drenched. He had left his black leather jacket at home because of the brief sunshine that had appeared at the time of his departure. He walked through the low, open street door. The courtyard was small and looked sad in the May rain. Raindrops drummed a constant beat against the tin roofs of the neighbouring houses. The crescendo made him reminiscent of his childhood, pushing his father's cart. His father would cover him

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

with the sleeve of his large *Pherran,* as he shouted: *'English shirts, Velayati Pants, Ladakhi Jackets maa kyenh ... ' [2]*

Commander Kaka clambered the two steps of the brick porch without any hurry. The first thing he noticed was the low ceiling of the corridor. He barely managed to get his large frame through the narrow, low front door.

All the ground floor doors were shut but not locked. He looked into each room without knocking and found the rooms deserted. The rooms had the unmistakable signs of long abandonment. He did not lose his poise and decided to go upstairs. When he had just clambered the two steps of the spiral mud staircase, a female voice addressed him from upstairs.

'Who is it?' The voice asked loudly in an attempt to offset the noise of the rain pelting on the tin roofs.

Commander Kaka shook the rainwater from his hair with the fingers of his left hand and threw the wet hair over his forehead. Then he checked the state of his Chinese pistol and answered casually but in a raised voice: 'I want to see doctor Sahb.'

'Come up quickly,' the female voice said. 'He is about to leave.'

"Leave for hell," Commander Kaka thought.

The woman, the doctor's wife, was waiting in the first-floor corridor. A long black-and-white chequered apron covered her brown dress. 'You'll catch a cold,' she said. Up there, the noise was subdued by the

[2] Buy English shirts, Velayati Pants, Ladakhi Jackets

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

surrounding walls. She got inside the room to her left, came out with a dry black towel and handed it to Commander Kaka.

Ruffling his wet hair with the towel, he again asked casually. 'Where is doctor Sahb?'

'To your right,' she answered.

Commander Kaka entered the room stuffed with books. It exhaled a breath of warmth and ancient paper. Pictures of Hindu gods, one standing with numerous hands spread out, another sitting in deep meditation with a couple of snakes coiled around his upright neck, were hanging from the mud-plastered walls. The bespectacled doctor, in his office attire, sitting in an old wicker chair, was reading the latest edition of 'European Journal' when he spotted Commander Kaka enter from the creaking door.

Kaka came in stooping. The doctor dropped the red book on the small, round, wicker table in front of him. A small, sparkling brass statue of Shri Ganesh and a white stethoscope were placed on the wicker table.

'Come,' he said. 'Sit here, son,' indicating a small triangular wooden stool with a cushioned seat.

Commander Kaka did not move from his place. He looked at the doctor as if he was an insignificant being wasting a wicker chair. Then he wrapped the wet, black towel around the pistol and, without speaking a word, shot three bullets at the doctor, one after the other. All the bullets hit the doctor and killed him instantly. He fell to his right, and his blood spattered all over the book racks. The sparkling brass statue of Shri Ganesh became crimson and fell over with the slap of the blood

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

jet.

In the deafening noise of the pelting rain, it seemed as if everything happened in dead silence. Commander Kaka did not speak even then. When he was about to leave the room, the doctor's wife came in, completely horrified. 'Who are you?' She asked in her growing hysteria.

'Cho...' he stopped midway and corrected himself. 'Commander Kaka,' he said and whirled the wet towel to disperse the smoke and smell of gunpowder. Once the air was clear, he handed the towel back to the lady. He took two steps towards the half-open door, stopped, turned around, took the towel back from the hands of the frozen lady, and clambered down the spiral mud staircase. He reached the porch, gauged the intensity of the rain and gently spread the black towel over his head.

*

No matter how hard she tried to avoid her new friends, Shaheen could not detach herself from them. They forced her to accompany them wherever they went. They shopped excessively, travelled in black-and-yellow Bajaj auto-rickshaws and ate grilled chicken and fried rice in dimly-lit restaurants. She learnt that they kept themselves abreast of every kind of new fitness aid and were preparing for a pageant in Jammu.

Young Dr Uzma had taken on the role of their Diet Guru. She gave them food charts on daily basis to enhance their metabolism and optimise their weight loss. 'Agility,' she said, '...is the modern mantra.'

She explained to them how a flexible diet chart

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

could not only keep the body prepared for any eventuality but also boost the immune system.

When Dr Firdousa gave Shaheen money to get nail paint and hair curlers so that she could prepare for Rukhsana's upcoming marriage, she came back with a weight measuring machine and skipping rope. Sometimes, she enraged Raja Begum with the measuring tape, which had inch marks on one side and millimetre graduations on the other. Raja Begum's insistence on cosmetics and artefacts of beauty would be replaced by voice recorders and tummy trimmers till one day, she came home with a synthetic mat that could be folded like a bag.

'Is that for the pigeons to feed on?' Raja Begum asked with her spatula nose broadening further in consternation.

'No,' explained Shaheen. 'It's a yoga mat.' From that day on, Shaheen practised yoga in her bedroom. While Rukhsana was still lingering with the sweet dawn slumber across the *Wurusi*, she would practice her yoga for hours. She sat cross-legged, eyes closed and mind relaxed in total surrender to explore the internal universe.

Later, during the afternoons, she celebrated her walks with Bublee at Lal Chowk. During earlier days, when boys looked at her, she was always apprehensive that something was wrong with her. She would become conscious of her unkempt uniform, a torn stitch under her armfold, a large pimple that had overgrown on her cheek, or her messy hair. But when Rizwan looked at her, she felt safe because she had the feeling that she

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

was at her best and perfect, and wanted to be looked at without stopping and without lowering the fierceness of his gaze.

She engaged herself with his insatiable yearnings. Tense and excited, they walked side by side with an irresistible urge to engage in a meeting, to talk face to face, hold hands and give in to the riotous magnetism of their mutual attraction. They struggled in the gluey medium of their longings. Their limbs grew fidgety. But the barriers of the omnipresent public made it impossible for them to unite. They suffered the torture of separation when they were an arm's distance apart.

Sometimes, when the agony grew unbearable, they let the passers-by distract them for a moment until their hearts bled once more to the point of death, and Rizwan would rush to her and stop a yard away from her, looking at her, craving for a single word from her mouth that could set him free or hammer the last nail in his coffin. Through Bublee, they exchanged their heartaches and ardent letters and were occupied by a fierce argument over the rendezvous so that they could meet away from the unavoidable eyes of the public - a 'heart to heart meeting', as Rizwan had put it.

But the harder they tried to imagine a place for their meeting, the more dangerous the proposition sounded because the Veil Enforcement Brigade attacked any couple who did not follow the dress code they had issued through local newspapers, and could not prove that they were married, or questioned their authority. They raided low-budget restaurants, public parks and bus stops and hurled black colour over the

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

faces of unveiled girls, and got the boys thrashed by manipulating the perception of the roadside public.

Bublee, with her deep insight into the Kashmiri social setup, managed to overcome the desperation of the two harassed lovers, and suggested her uncle's hotel in Gulmarg.

*

On Thursday, Commander Kaka had gathered the whereabouts of Dr Pankaj Shah, the latest incumbent Principal of Kashmir Medical College and Hospital. He was a short, thrifty fellow with small, chubby hands. His hair, which he kept oiled and combed all the time, was still black. He was a surgeon who refused to wear hair caps during the surgeries on the grounds that it was an effeminate gesture. 'It doesn't matter,' he had said to the Committee Head assigned to look into the complaint. 'The success of a surgery depends not on the correctness of the dress but the dexterity of hands.'

Commander Kaka met him at the staff canteen. He was wearing the black towel over his head so that he could only see what was in front of him, like a horse tied to a buggy, and not be distracted from his mission. One waiter with an unshaven chin, picking up used cups and saucers, asked Commander Kaka to go to a public canteen as he was not a staff member.

Dr Pankaj Shah, sitting at the front table and looking directly at Commander Kaka, could not stop the joke forming inside his mind. 'He is looking for a bathroom,' he said with a tinge of laughter. 'Poor fellow wants to take a shower.'

The canteen hall burst into a roaring laughter. Two

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

doctors spilt their tea on the aprons of their colleagues, and another one fell victim to unstoppable coughing because he choked on his vegetable sandwich.

Commander Kaka, without speaking a word, took out his Chinese pistol and shot three bullets at the laughing doctor. No one remained in the hall except the waiter, waiting for Commander Kaka to decide his fate. Commander Kaka did not shoot him. 'You can go,' he said calmly to the waiter. 'You are fortunate for being born unlucky.'

*

Bublee was at the reception when Shaheen walked in. Rizwan was looking out at the undulating peaks and valleys of Gulmarg. Snow had disappeared from most ridges, but some kids were skiing in the troughs. Their parents had made a ring about them to keep them from skiing in the danger zones.

'At this time of the year,' said a primed, clean-shaved waiter-boy to Rizwan, 'there are no ski coaches available.'

Rizwan smiled and looked back at the waiter-boy, consumed by the notion that ways of love were slipperier than frozen snow. Then he spotted Shaheen and Bublee walking towards him. Shaheen had a dark, heart-shaped stone hanging from her neck. She was wearing a stunning red kameez-shalwar with black polka dots. Rizwan felt a stirring in his soul.

'Every prince,' said Shaheen to Rizwan, '...and every dog ... has his day.' Then she laughed with her entire body. Bublee hushed her and indicated towards two chairs and a small glass table in a corner near the

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

large window.

'I'll go and meet Ravi uncle,' Bublee said, walking away towards the corridor.

Ravi Bhan and his three cousins had gathered in his manager's office, contemplating the situation of Kashmiri Hindus in the wake of recent killings at the hands of Kaka Towel. 'It is not hard to see where they are heading,' said Ravi.

'I know,' said Chotu, the youngest of all cousins. 'They are heading to Jyoti Dhar Pandita.'

'What?' The eldest of the cousins, Brother Ji, said. 'I don't get it.'

'If you had gotten it at the proper time,' retorted Chotu, 'we shouldn't have to face these times.'

'Stop it,' interjected the middle one, Raju. He indicated towards Bublee, who had just entered the room, with a slight cough to announce her arrival. There was silence, and Bublee grew suspicious.

'What happened?' She inquired. 'Why are you people so grim?'

'How's your Mamma?' Ravi Bhan asked.

'She is good, why?'

'Just asking.'

*

They were separated by inverted glasses and bottled water. Rizwan sat there looking at Shaheen, enthralled by her silence. *"Lips that don't speak," he thought, "...speak the best."*

'Are you a philanderer?' She asked him suddenly.

'No,' said Rizwan, trying to analyse the tone of her

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

boyish voice. 'I'm a wanderer who has found what he was wandering for.'

'So, you are not a philanderer?' She repeated her inquiry, her lips unable to conceal her excitement.

'No. I'm not.'

'How do I know?'

Rizwan could not answer that. He was looking at the heart-shaped black stone that reminded him of his own remark of 'heart-to-heart meeting'. Perhaps that had done the trick for him. Her trembling lips were betraying her cold words. She, too, was delighted. *Perhaps she, too, had fallen for him. What else could he have possibly asked for?* However, to keep the conversation going, he said, 'Ask yourself.'

She did not answer him; instead, she asked him straight away, 'Why did you follow me like a shadow?'

'I couldn't willingly stop pursuing you,' he said. 'What has been seen cannot be unseen.'

*

'Tell her,' said Chotu.

'Shut up,' retorted Raju.

'We already know,' Bublee said calmly. 'But we don't believe it.'

'The two would-be Principals also did not believe it,' said Chotu. 'But they are dead nonetheless.'

'Why would he do that, Chotu?' Brother Ji asked.

'He?' Chotu repeated. 'It's not he. It's they, Brother Ji. They!'

'They think it's their time to take over now,' replied Ravi Bhan. 'Chotu is right.'

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

'That means,' concluded Raju, 'we are all about to be dead.'

*

'You didn't have to answer me,' Rizwan continued. 'I was happy shining in your presence.'

'I had to,' she replied. 'You were in love. And I wanted to tell you that you'll never be fixed.'

'Love is the fix,' he said in a slow, protracted breath. Then his breathing quickened, and he said, 'Did you know that tomorrow is not promised?' He indicated towards a European couple coming out of the sliding doors of the silver-coloured metallic elevator. He looked at Shaheen, who was looking back at him with the same storm brewing inside her.

They got up and got into the elevator in silence and tacit understanding. Rizwan pressed the digit three. When the door closed with a terse bell, he could not stand the overwhelming appeal of his desire. He held her face in the cup of his two sweating hands and looked into her enormous bright-grey eyes.

She couldn't stand his intense gaze and pulled his head to her bosom so he could listen to the clamour of her uproarious heart. He could not stand the alarm in her chest and raised his head to her level. He saw in her eyes the same dizzying, tender tempest that was welling up inside his own chest. Then, they witnessed the suffocating silence of the metallic cubicle transform into a long kiss. When the elevator stopped at the third floor with another terse bell, they had come out of a terrible darkness.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

*

When General Sikandar asked Commander Kaka, who was the next in line, a gathering of men with overfilled cement sacks entered Chinar Ghar. 'I'm third in line for faculty head at the university,' said a man who breathed like a sprinter.

'And,' asked an amused General Sikandar, 'why should you tell us all that?'

Commander Kaka failed to understand what all these people had come to Chinar Ghar for. 'If you want a pious person to pray for your promotion,' said Commander Kaka, '...cross the corridor. Boba is in the kitchen.'

'No,' said a man with a grey *Karakul*. 'We have come to you, Commander Kaka. Only you could deliver us.'

'I will never be head of the Polytechnic College if you don't help me,' said a bespectacled old man. 'Here,' he displayed the bagful of one hundred-rupee notes. 'We have brought you the party fund.'

'All of you?' General Sikandar asked. They nodded silently as Neelam Khanum entered the room, wearing her black veil. 'How much is in it?' He asked the bespectacled old man.

'Ten kilos of hundred-rupee notes, Jenab,' he replied. 'Not a single one is counterfeit.'

'It is so obvious,' declared Neelam Khanum. 'Even a fool can follow where it is heading.'

'What do you mean?' General Sikandar asked. 'We turn down these needy people?'

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

'Our scope is so limited by this tunnel-vision killings,' cautioned Neelam Khanum, '...that our fight would be labelled as a nepotistic uprising ... not a freedom movement!' She asked all the men to leave immediately and followed them as they reached the porch. She asked them to get into their shoes without wasting any time. When they resisted, she picked up her own slippers and chased them away until they were out of sight in the narrow street. Then she hurled the bagsful of currency notes after them. Then she got inside the street door so they could come back and take their money sacks.

'What do you propose we should do?' General Sikandar and Commander Kaka asked together, simultaneously at the height of their voices.

'Kill randomly,' said Neelam Khanum after she had recovered her breath. 'Make it confusing...' While she was still speaking out about the plan, Commander Kaka picked up his black towel, threw it over his head and walked out.

In the market, people waiting to get meat from the butcher were startled and confused because a gunshot was heard across the street. Commander Kaka had shot down Pran Kumar, the grocer, sitting cross-legged in his shop. Two hours later, Commander Kaka shot Pushkar Nath, the book-seller, leaning against his teak-wood counter. In the morning, he shot twin brothers who had just completed college and were coming back from their morning walk. They were still panting when Commander Kaka left the spot of shooting.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Chapter Eleven

Rizwan entered the 'Lost Paradise' houseboat, spellbound by the memory of the kiss in the elevator. He recollected that the kiss had not given him the feeling of a free fall but of flying weightless, like in a dream.

He tried, as an act of self-preservation, to conceal his excitement. But the incident spilled out in confusing bits as he spoke about the Gulmarg meet. At first, he told them that love is the only way to natural death ... All else is murder... That love is not designed to set one free. Then, he unwittingly admitted that love was an unassailable motivation. Irrational. Wild. And morally blind. Then he realised that they must have already figured it out, so he revealed his dream-like experience to them.

'It is no less than a dream,' Aadil said. 'Considering the location we are in.'

'Union is a rare possibility in these times,' said Waseem.

'A joy of that scale,' said Imtiyaz, '...ought to be celebrated.'

'And how do you propose,' asked Aadil, 'we celebrate in this God damned place? By swimming in Dal waters?'

'Eat steak, perhaps?' Gudda asked. 'Or should

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Waseem read us a page from the Enigma?'

They all laughed.

'Happiness is not measured by quantity but quality,' Showkat said after their laughter had died out in the vastness of the lake. He lunged at the Navy-Cut cigarette in Gudda's hand, took a long drag, and was about to take another one when Aadil claimed that it was his turn.

'*Baya*,' said Aadil, 'I have already tendered for a shot.'

'Waseem,' asked Gudda while handing the cigarette to Aadil, 'how do we celebrate then?'

Waseem, despite being the host, did not answer.

It was Rizwan himself who sorted things out. He had been rummaging in Waseem's audio collection in the old almirah near the low window. All the while, he was looking for something that exhibited the fervent nature of union. He spotted the one without any label that had been gifted to him by Samir at the outset of their friendship. Since he had no cassette player at home, he kept it in Waseem's library.

He inserted the cassette of Hafiz in the Phillips tape-recorder, flipped the cassette-block back in place with a dull click, and said: 'Silence. Rashid Hafiz!'

The houseboat turned to stone-silence as the tape recorder began to play the music. He turned the volume to full. The tattered houseboat came alive in the darkness of the night with the intense, captivating voice of Rashid Hafiz, in accompaniment to the instruments made out of mud, wood, and metal.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

'Ya tulih khanjar maaray...Nate' sani shaba rozay...

Yim zaar wanhas bardar...Kar sana su yaar bozay [3]

Six friends lost the sense of time and space. They forgot whose turn it was to take the drag. They got up and started whirling themselves in tune with the lyrics, which expressed the most likely outcomes of an encounter. The dance was not known to them. They turned their bodies in the same rhythm as the lyrics swung the music with it. The silence of the night accentuated the celebration of the union. Rizwan was unreachable and his trance encouraged others to go on.

Till midnight, they danced and sang with Hafiz over and over again until, without knocking, two gunmen burst into the houseboat with their shoes on. The masked gunman kicked the tape recorder with his sneakers. The appliance broke into three large pieces, and the cassette flew out through the low, open window and got lost in the depths of Dal Lake.

'You should be helping the nation with guns in your hands,' bashed the masked gunman. 'You ought to be fighting the Indian might ... and here you are dancing like Helen... that too in the middle of a night!'

Music and the cinema had been expressly forbidden at the outset of the uprising. Six friends were stupefied. They looked at each other, cursing their little happiness.

'Commander Sahb,' said the teenage, unmasked

[3] Either she will pick up a dagger and murder me Or she will stay the night with me I would narrate all my ordeals faithfully When will that beloved listen to me?

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

gunman, fiddling with his AK-47 rifle, 'shall I give them a leg-shot each?'

'No,' replied the masked gunman. He waited for the brewing notion to turn into speech. 'Get me the scissors.'

*

Shaheen picked up a pair of scissors from the lower drawer of the dressing table and began to trim the hair that did not flow with the rest.

She was reminded of Rizwan at the Mountain Fish Hotel. She had watched him appear and disappear on the undulation of the green turf with white patches. His back looked sad as if it was beaten by rain, and he was drenched in sadness. While she was looking at him, she was thinking about something else. She kept him in her sight till he disappeared around the bend. Then she looked at Bublee. 'I want to become a model-cum-actress,' she confided in her. 'So that I can not only walk the catwalks but also appear on the big screen.'

Bublee was not surprised, considering the kind of build Shaheen had. 'It seems realistic to me,' she had said softly in her reply, '...although you might have to work hard on yourself.'

'It is as if,' revealed Shaheen, 'that a black veil has been lifted from my heart.'

At night, Shaheen crossed over the *Wurusi*, stood in front of the tilting mirror, took off her dress and measured her essentials. Her huge hips, Rukhsana felt were nothing but rogue appeal, seemed the greatest hurdle in realising her modelling dream. But in the

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

excitement of the change fuelled by her Gulmarg outing, she was confident she would soon turn them into a flat hourglass figure.

It was for the first time in her life that she had seen her whole adult body in a mirror. She tilted and turned so that she could see herself in different shades of light. Her body reflected in the pink and red plywood tiles of the ceiling and filled the room with strange distortions. Her long, whitish neck was too flabby. Both her upper arms were too heavy. Her tummy dropped in small dolorous rolls in front of her, making her navel completely invisible. And her enormous thighs tapered down to conform to the narrow knee joints. Then there was that Raja Begum-type bosom with unrestrained growth and direction. One evening, in an attempt to mock her distressing milky bosom, she sadly whispered in Rukhsana's ears, 'Too small for gourds but too big for brinjals.'

'Eggplants,' Rukhsana replied while making sure that every corner of the window was covered by the new crewel curtain.

From that night onwards, whenever they cooked brinjals or gourds, the duo would giggle till sleep. 'You'll need to run, Shaheen,' Rukhsana told her after doing her critical examination. 'You've got to trim your body from top to toe. Look at the models of these days...'

Shaheen went out with Laila only to find that no feminine fitness dresses were available at Lambert Lane or Forest Lane. They rummaged the Goni Khan Gully, came back, and searched the Abi Guzar market

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

but found nothing of interest to them. All fitness dresses that the shopkeepers displayed were for boys.

Arifa advised them to go to the Sunday flea- market where people sold used Western clothes of all types on folding carts.

There, Shaheen spotted a blood-red pair of slacks mixed up with a dozen others on the cart. She did not look for anything else because she was reminded of the film shooting in the shady valley of Pahalgam. The dancing girl wore the same blood-red slacks.

The vendor suggested she look for something else, something suitable for girls of her age, but she had found what she was looking for. She handed him the money without haggling or looking for anything else, and walked away in an ecstatic mood.

The following day, when Shaheen went out for her first-ever morning stroll, a trail of young boys carrying satchels started shouting, cat-calling and whistling because her statuesque bearing and long strides invoked disbelief and bitterness in their little hearts. It was only when Laila joined her near the Chowk that she came to know that her left buttock was clearly visible through a long tear in her second-hand slacks.

Shaheen was not discouraged, though. She continued to walk her catwalks on the stone walkway between the two rows of evergreen shrubs in the courtyard of Mir Manzil.

In fact, the four friends had kept their clandestine dreams alive in such uncertain situations that no one seemed to care about such triviality. Despite the unreliability of the mailing service, they continued to

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

receive instructional manuals, personality development books, procedures for easy hair removal, and walking so that both feet landed on the same line, English-speaking course material, audio and video aids and the latest fashion magazines from Bombay. The girls were so concerned with their dreams that they did not miss a single aid that could help them reach their first target - the Miss Jammu and Kashmir beauty pageant.

On Tuesday, Shaheen went to Laila's home to take her jumpsuit that her father, Javed Shah, had brought from London. At that moment, two serious looking men watched Laila paint in the garden. Later, a tall, dark-skinned man with large spectacles, whom the men called 'Commandant', joined them. After admiring Laila, who was painting the red roses white, they started their meeting around a large table in the ground floor hall.

That night, immediately after the men had left following a long meeting, the girls mimicked the meeting members at the same table. Shaheen took on the role of Commandant. Laila became the Home Minister. Yasmin placed a paper cap on her head and talked like Javed Shah, and Arifa was delighted in mimicking the erudite Police Commissioner. Shaheen also used Laila's brown teddy bear as an invisible Joker.

'It has become increasingly difficult...' started Laila, the Home Minister, '...for me to defend my position. We must do something about it.'

'Do what?' Arifa, the Police Commissioner, asked. 'Like what, I mean?'

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

'I don't know,' answered Laila. 'That is why I have called you people here.'

'I might be your host,' said Yasmin, mimicking Javed Shah. 'But I'm also the one who is connected to the ground.'

'Your role is going to be pivotal here,' said Shaheen, the Commandant.

'We must think laterally,' said Laila. 'Forget our usual stance.'

'What do you mean?' Shaheen asked.

'He means that we must lie parallel to the ground,' Shaheen spoke without moving her lips but stirred the teddy bear with her left hand.

They all laughed but returned to their roles immediately.

'Diamond cuts diamond,' said Yasmin.

They all mimicked the act of thinking with the forefinger of their right hands on their right cheeks.

'Are we going to change our jobs,' said Shaheen, the ventriloquist.

'The point is,' asked a grim-looking Yasmin, 'will they trust us?'

'Make sure they have no other option,' replied Laila.

'He is right,' said Shaheen, the Commandant. 'After all, they have never tasted liberty. Have they?'

'Where do we start?' Arifa, the Police Commissioner, asked.

'Find the weakest link?' Shaheen the Commandant replied.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

They all got up and mimicked the three dark-skinned men and placed the drinks on the table.

'Yes,' answered a satisfied-looking Laila. She poured a drink for herself. 'Find all those who have a grain of grudge against the establishment of Pakistan. Find all those whom the militants have hurt or humiliated.' She gulped down half of her glass and asked others to do likewise. They waited. Laila went on, 'Gather all those whose dreams have been shattered because of this militancy.' Then she belched heavily. 'Find all those whose earnings have been affected by the gun. Gather all those who want to handle a gun either in the form of a militant or a renegade.'

'This is going to be a large crowd,' said Arifa.

They all laughed.

'Larger than the militant group itself,' said Yasmin.

'Drink to celebrate!' Laila said.

'Pour, Jenab. Pour,' said Arifa.

Yasmin received a pat from others.

Unaccustomed to the liquor, Arifa vomited on the teddy bear's face. At that moment, hazed by the liquor, they began to mix up their roles.

'You ruined my dress, Commissioner,' complained Shaheen without moving her lips. She took off her kameez and shalwar and threw them in the dustbin. When she kneeled and started groping between Arifa's feet, Laila did not say anything. Instead, she poured another glass and handed it to the teddy bear. The liquor and the glass fell over.

'What's wrong with you, Minister?' Laila asked.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

'You don't drink on Tuesdays?'

'Can't you see,' retorted Shaheen without moving her lips, '...that I am looking for my specs.'

Arifa loosened her pyjamas and revealed her behind. 'See, it's not here,' she clarified.

'It wasn't that big,' said Shaheen.

Yasmin took off her frock to reveal her tiny, transparent bra. 'Commissioner, here you are,' she took off her bra and handed it over to Shaheen, who dozed off after vomiting in Arifa's pyjamas.

Shaheen woke up in the middle of that night with a tearing headache and found herself and her friends in a pool of vomit and faeces.

In the morning, still under the influence of the booze, the girls were washed, dried and clothed by the dark-coloured maids and sent home in the Javed Shah's official Ambassador car.

Dr Firdousa thrashed Shaheen with a broom that Gopa made from stinging nettle branches. Then they covered her blistered body with mud-plaster, let her dry in the sun and locked her on her side of the twin bedroom, without food. Dr Firdousa burnt all her second-hand Western outfits in the courtyard and spread the yoga mat on the Flame vine for the pigeons to feed on.

*

The news came through the milkman, who came at seven in the morning. Dr Jyoti Dhar Pandita placed the copper pot on the floor and held a large plastic sieve over the pot to arrest any dirt that might have gone into

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

the milk. The milkman poured the milk from the aluminium can he held inclined on his right thigh. 'There is no point catching the innocuous little dirt, Doctor Sahb,' said the milkman. 'They are about to catch you.'

'Catch me?' Jyoti Dhar Pandita shouted in shock. 'Who?'

The milkman did not answer. He straightened the aluminium milk can and inserted the chained lid back into its mouth. 'A word to the wise,' he said and walked away.

Dr Jyoti Dhar Pandita did not move from the porch. Her bent knees remained glued to the floor while her left hand held the rim of the copper pot.

Samir and Bublee came out on the porch.

'What is it, Mamma?' Bublee asked.

'Would they be after me, seriously?' The shocked Dr Jyoti said. 'Why?'

'Because they killed the two would-be Principals of the Medical College,' replied Samir. 'You are the third one!'

'I don't believe this nonsense,' Dr Jyoti said confidently. 'In that case, all the shopkeepers should also consider themselves dead because Kaka Towel also killed a few of them.'

In the dread of their mother's safety, the siblings had completely ignored the killing of the shopkeepers. They were so relieved that, together, they helped their mother walk in as if she was not stable.

'Bring in the milk pot,' Dr Jyoti reminded Bublee.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

'The cat is on the prowl.'

Dr Jyoti and Bublee, free and in high spirits, left at nine-thirty and got into the overfilled Tata minibus.

Dr Jyoti alighted near the Medical College and Hospital gate. The gatekeeper saluted to her as usual. She passed from the side of the drop gate, turned left on the footpath, turned another left, walked into the three-storeyed brick building, clambered the concrete staircase, turned right and spotted her stout peon at the door of her room, who indicated to her with his eyes to avoid the office. But Dr Jyoti Dhar Pandita's spirits were so high that she could not comprehend the danger the peon was asking her to avoid.

The peon looked back through the office window and used his hands to shoo away Dr Jyoti Dhar Pandita, but did not open his mouth. When she walked inside her Head of the Department's room, lifted the curtain and pushed the door open, she saw Kaka Towel sitting in her chair, waiting for her with his feet on her sparkling glass-top table.

'Are you Dr Jyoti Dhar Pandita?' Commander Kaka asked her and looked into her eyes. 'The would-be Principal?'

She did not answer him; instead, intrigued by a lost memory, she began remembering him from her past. She looked back at him and found out that she knew him.

Commander Kaka gathered his legs, stood up from the reclining chair and aimed his Chinese pistol at her, but did not shoot.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Suddenly, she was reminded of his face and whispered in her dry throat, 'Chota Mamoo.'

Commander Kaka did not hear the whisper but was reminded of his childhood days and got confused. He kept the pistol aimed at the doctor and tried to remember her from his past. When he found out who she was, he lowered the gun and instantly vacated the room. He did not look back at her. He kept his head down, turned left, clambered down the concrete stairs in silence, got out of the brick building, turned right and walked away in silence. Once he was past the drop gate, he hurried in his steps.

'I cannot shoot her,' he told General Sikandar, panting.

Neelam Khanum, realising that Commander Kaka had come in without warning, turned her back to him and placed the black veil over her scared face.

General Sikandar did not ask him 'why' but waited for him to gather his breath.

'I cannot shoot the one who circumcised me,' Kaka added.

'In that case,' said General Sikandar after a brief pause, 'she must have circumcised me as well.'

'And the poor martyr...' reminded Commander Kaka.

'Who will shoot her then?' Neelam Khanum asked.

'That is not the point,' said General Sikandar. 'Rukhsana's marriage is days away, and we have to face Raja Begum.'

*

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure

With their hair chopped crudely by means of a tailor's scissors, the six dishevelled friends waited for the dawn so that they could go to the barber shop and set right whatever hair was left on their heads.

All night, they could not sleep. Nor could they eat anything. When Gudda tried to put a piece of bread in his mouth, he chucked it away. 'It tastes like mud,' he said and got up to wash his mouth, believing that he had actually tasted mud. They were tormented by the humiliation at the hands of the group commander, who not only chopped off their hair but allowed the teenage gunmen to thrash them with the butt of his AK-47 rifle.

At dawn, when his sleepy eyes had just shut, and Rizwan was dreaming, his left shoulder shook. He turned in his sleep, but the shaking did not stop. 'It is a crackdown,' said a husky voice. The smell of a fresh shave invaded Rizwan.

As he opened his eyes, he could make out the silhouette of a tall man in fatigues, wearing a black scarf under his green, metallic helmet.

'Get up. Quick,' commanded the soldier.

Digitized By e Gangotri and Kashmir Treasure